

Home Is Where My Horse Is

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Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Categories:

F/M, M/M

Fandom:

Julie and The Phantoms (TV)

Relationships:

Alex Mercer/Willie (Julie and The Phantoms), Julie Molina/Luke Patterson, Carlos Molina & Julie Molina & Ray Molina, Alex Mercer & Luke Patterson & Reggie Peters (Julie and The Phantoms), Chad Danforth & Nick (Julie and The Phantoms), Ryan Evans & Nick (Julie and The Phantoms), Nick/Carrie Wilson, Bobby | Trevor Wilson/Reggie Peters, Reggie Peters & Alex Mercer & Julie Molina & Ray Molina & Carlos Molina

Characters:

Alex Mercer (Julie and The Phantoms), Reggie Peters (Julie and The Phantoms), Ray Molina, Carrie Wilson, Luke Patterson (Julie and The Phantoms), Flynn (Julie and The Phantoms), Julie Molina, Willie (Julie and The Phantoms), Aunt Victoria (Julie and The Phantoms), Bobby | Trevor Wilson, Carlos Molina, Caleb Covington, Rose, Nick (Julie and The Phantoms), Ryan Evans, Chad Danforth

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Willie (Julie and The Phantoms), Alex Mercer & Julie Molina are Best Friends, Alex Mercer Has Bad Parents (Julie and The Phantoms), Gay Male Character, Everyone Needs A Hug, Alex Mercer & Carrie Wilson Friendship, Mentioned Caleb Covington, reggie peters foster care, alex mercer foster care, Adoption, Reggie Peters Needs a Hug (Julie and The Phantoms), Past Luke Patterson/Julie Molina (Julie and the Phantoms), Luke Patterson has history with everyone (Julie and the Phantoms), Alive Alex Mercer & Luke Patterson & Reggie Peters (Julie and The Phantoms), Group Home, Evil Caleb Covington, Reggie Peters Has Bad Parents (Julie and The Phantoms), Good Parent Ray Molina, Ray Molina Adopts The Phantoms, Established Chad Danforth/Ryan Evans, Nick Danforth-Evans - Freeform, Bobby is Not Trevor Wilson, Alternate Universe - High School, Updates Coming I Swear - I Just Got Really Distracted On A New Fic

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Part 1 of [fics where I make Reggie Peters suffer before getting a happy ending](#)

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Home Is Where My Horse Is

by [theamd426](#)

Summary

"Oh my god, Reggie!" Alex said. He dropped his textbook on the floor and ran towards the boy hugging him. He looked the boy up and down and frowned when he noticed the bruise on his face. The bruise that most likely came from Reggie's previous caregiver Caleb.

Alex, Luke, and Reggie all met in a group home run by Caleb Covington. Both Alex and Luke were able to get out fairly quickly; Luke went back to his parents while Alex was fostered by the Molina's. Reggie, on the other hand, wasn't so lucky.

Notes

So I changed the ages for most of the characters.

Reggie Peters: 15 years old, going into his Sophomore year of high school.

Julie Molina: 15 years old, going into her Sophomore year of high school.

Alex Mercer: 16 years old going into his Junior year of high school.

Luke Patterson: 16 years old going into his Junior year of high school.

Flynn: 15 years old, going into her Sophomore year of high school.

Willie: 15 years old going into his Sophomore year of high school.

Carrie Wilson: 15 years old, going into her Sophomore year of high school.

Chapter 1: A New Placement

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ray had his kid's last day of school before winter break planned out. He would pick up Alex and Julie from school and take them out to lunch to celebrate finishing their midterm exams before they went and picked up Carlos to go Christmas tree hunting. They were supposed to spend the entire night together as a family, watching holiday movies and drinking hot chocolate. But now, it looks like things were changing.

Ray sighed as he hung up the phone, and he immediately went onto his laptop to start a Walmart pickup. He needed to make sure that there was plenty of food in the house. He looked up and smiled as Alex, Julie, and Carlos walked through the front door. Carlos immediately turned the tv on and started up his PS4. Alex and Julie headed straight into the kitchen to grab a snack.

“Hey, dad,” Julie said. She set her bag down on the table and went in to hug him.

“Hey, baby girl,” he said, giving her a tight squeeze. “How did your pre-calc exam go?”

Julie looked to Alex giving him a nervous glare. Ray took a deep breath. He had a feeling he knew what that look meant, but then again, the two had a habit of pulling a bait and switch.

“I think I aced it!” Julie exclaimed.

“I knew you would,” Ray said as he high-fived Julie. He then turned to Alex and smiled. “How was APUSH?”

Alex took a deep breath as he started to clean an apple thoroughly. He looked up at Ray and just shrugged.

“I’m sure you did fine,” Ray said, hugging the boy.

“I don’t know,” Alex said, taking a bite out of his apple. “I feel like it could have gone better. I probably got a four on my essay. There’s no way Mr. Mendoza will give me a five.”

“Yes, but a four is still really good! Considering, he grades them harsher than the actual AP exam,” Ray said.

“Yeah, I guess your right,” Alex said as he took a deep breath and sat down in the chair next to Ray.

Alex glanced over at Ray’s laptop, confused. They always did their grocery runs on Sunday.

Ray huffed and sat down next to Alex. “Can you please go get Carlos for a second?” he asked Julie.

Julie nodded and went into the living room to drag her brother away from the PS4.

“Is everything okay?” Alex asked.

“Everything’s fine,” he said, reassuring Alex. “I just need to run something by you guys. That’s all.”

Alex slowly nodded his head before realizing what this could be concerning. Julie had mentioned a similar meeting before he came into their home.

Julie and Carlos finally made their way into the kitchen after Carlos got killed in his Fortnite battle.

“Are you kidding me?” Carlos yelled in frustration. “Dad, Julie just made me lose my match!”

“You can start a new one later. We need to have a family discussion,” Ray said.

Alex blushed when Ray mentioned him as part of their family. Even though the boy had only been living with them for nine months, he still wasn’t sure if he was an official member of the Molina family. Even though Ray had given him a bedroom, paid for drum lessons, helped him get for his first date with Willie, and even had a matching Christmas Stocking made, he still felt like this wasn’t real. He wasn’t really apart of this family.

“So,” Ray said, making sure that everyone was paying attention. “I got a call from Linda from Social Services today, and she was wondering if we would be interested in taking in another kid.”

“Girl or boy?” Julie asked, hoping the answer would be a girl.

“A boy, he’s 15 and...” ray took a deep breath and looked at Alex.
“He’s been staying at the Covington Home for Boys.”

Alex took a deep breath and took another bite of his apple. He hadn’t thought of that place since he moved in with Molina’s, and he wasn’t exactly keen on reliving his memories. But, he remembered his time there was rough, and there was no way he was going to deny any child’s chance to escape.

“When will he move in?” Alex asked.

“Tomorrow afternoon. Are you sure you guys are okay with taking in a new placement before Christmas?”

Alex nodded his head. He couldn’t imagine spending the holidays at that horrible place. He was lucky that he only had to spend a couple of months there before his social worker had found a family that was willing to take in an openly gay teen.

Alex looked at Carlos and Julie and gave them pleading eyes to agree to let the poor kid stay. The two immediately smiled and approved as well. There was enough love to go around.

“Perfect,” Ray said, picking up his phone. “I’ll give Linda a callback and let her know that we will take him in. Do you think Luke would be willing to give you guys a ride home after school?”

Alex nodded his head. He knew Luke would do anything to help a kid that was in the care of Caleb Covington. That was where they met, of course.

“I’ll double-check when he comes over tonight,” Alex assured Ray.

“Please do not be up all night,” Ray begged.

“Relax,” Alex said. “I’m just helping him rehearse his monologue for his drama exam.”

“I still can’t believe he signed up for that class as an elective,” Julie said, holding back her laughter.

“I can’t believe he lost the bet and had to do it,” Alex laughed.

Ray smiled at Julie and Alex and hoped that the new kid would fit right in with his new siblings.

Ray came down the stairs, checking to make sure everything was ready for the new placement tomorrow. The spare bedroom was vacuumed and had fresh sheets. He had a grocery pickup scheduled for nine in the morning, which gave him plenty of time to drop all of the kids off at school for their last exam and get all of the groceries put away and the snack basket filled before he needed to and meet his new child. There was just one little problem; he couldn't find the snack basket.

Ray had gotten the snack basket as a precaution after the family had gotten their foster care license, but they didn't need it with Alex. His parents had kicked Alex out after they caught him kissing another boy, and while The Molina's weren't his first foster placement, his short stay at The Covington Home for boys had been less than ideal. The boy, thankfully, didn't get any long-term scarring from his stay there. However, after getting sent a briefing on their new placement, Ray decided it would be best to bring back the snack basket.

His search continued upstairs when he spotted Julie lying on her bedroom floor going over Biology notes.

"Hey, Mija," he said, knocking on the door. "Why aren't you with the boys in the studio?"

"They needed some private time," Julie said, taking off her glasses. "I think they're just reminiscing on their time at Caleb's. Luke doesn't talk about it much, but Caleb really screwed with his head."

"Yeah, I bet," he said, taking a seat at the edge of Julie's bed. "Look, I haven't told Alex or Luke yet but, the kid we're bringing in has been in Caleb's care for two years."

"So does that mean-"

"-Yeah, they probably knew him."

Julie got up from the floor and sat beside her dad. She looked up at him with concerned eyes.

"Why haven't you told them?" Julie asked.

"You know how Alex gets. He worries about the slightest things. And Luke will automatically jump to conclusions about who he thinks is moving in. I just don't want to get their hopes up. Especially since-"

"-They're worried about their old roommate," Julie interrupts.

“Exactly, do me a favor and just keep an eye on them at school,” he said, patting her knee.

“Sure thing,” she said, smiling. “We don’t want Alex going into a panic attack on the first day of Christmas break. Speaking of which, when are we getting our tree?”

“I’m not sure yet, Mija,” he said, getting up from his daughter’s bed. “Let’s play it by ear and see how the new boy is adjusting. I think this will be his first real Christmas in at least two years, maybe longer.”

“Smart, don’t overwhelm the kid, anything else,” she said, making a mental checklist.

“Do you know where the snack basket is?”

“Luke hijacked it and put it in the studio last week when we were helping him study for his math midterm.”

“Thanks, Mija,” he said, leaving the room.

Ray walked back out to the studio to grab the basket when he overheard Luke and Alex having a conversation on the studio floor.

“I just hope he’s okay,” Luke said as he flopped down onto a pillow.

“Yeah, I know,” Alex said, staring at the floor. “It’s just not fair that we got out before him.”

“I wrote him a letter when I got back home,” Luke said, smiling. “I doubt Caleb gave it to him, but I was hopeful.”

Alex smiled at Luke and held his hand. They both laid in the studio in silence.

“Hey boys,” Ray said as he opened the door to the Studio. “Do you mind if I take the snack basket? I promise I’ll get a new one for out here.”

“Go for it,” Alex said as he got up and emptied the basket filled with nut-free snacks.

“Thanks,” Ray said, taking the basket from Alex. He lingered for a moment before turning to both boys. “You know you guys can talk to me about what happened at the group home, right? It wasn’t your fault.”

Alex nodded his head. He trusted Ray, but he didn't want to think about his time there any more than he had to.

"Okay, well, it's getting pretty late. Luke, you may want to get home before your parents get worried."

Luke nodded his head and got up from the floor.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Alex," he said, hugging him. "Goodnight, Mr. Molina."

"Goodnight, Luke," Ray said as Luke was walking out the door. "Why don't you stop by on Saturday and say hi to our new placement. I think he would like that."

"Sure thing," he smiled before the boy headed towards his car.

Ray walked over and hugged Alex before ushering him out of the Studio and into the main house to get ready for bed.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys enjoy this first chapter! I've been kind of in a depressive rut since this pandemic started, and I haven't really written prose in a year. Bear in mind I'm a bit rusty, but I'm trying to get back in the swing of writing. Let me know what you guys think, and the second chapter should be up later today or tomorrow.

Chapter 2: Safe and Sound

Chapter Summary

"Are you sure you have everything?" Ray asked, hoping the kid had maybe forgotten something in the house.

The boy just timidly shook his head, not even bothering to look up at him.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has a scene that has been edited - thanks to WillowFaerie82 for the suggested change.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

"So," Julie asked, putting her cereal bowl in the sink. "When will the new kid get here?"

"I'm going to leave around 11 to go pick him up," Ray said, sipping his coffee. "But it may take me a few hours since I need to sign some paperwork and go over his history with his social worker. We should be back around 3.

"Can we bake cookies while we wait then?" Julie asked.

"Yeah, as long as you guys don't destroy my kitchen," he said.

Julie and Carlos both gave each other a high five. As she turned to do the same to Alex, she noticed that his mind was on something other than cookies.

"Wait, you're picking him up?" Alex asked. "Why isn't his social worker dropping him off?"

Ray let out an exasperated sigh.

"It's because they're shutting down the group home," he said, smiling at Alex. "And his social worker is too-

"Wait, are you serious?" Alex asked in disbelief. "Caleb is getting shutdown? What happened?"

"I don't know," he said. "All I know is that they have been scrambling for the past two days trying to find new homes for these boys."

“But they did, right?” he asked. “They found new homes for everyone?”

“I’m pretty sure they did.

Alex looked lost in thought for a few moments before looking up and grabbing his book bag.

“We should probably leave for school,” he said.

“We still have like fifteen minutes before we need to go,” Ray said, looking down at his phone to check the time.

“Yeah, I know. I just, I need to talk to Luke,” he said, putting his bowl in the sink. “Please.”

“Okay,” he said, grabbing his keys. “CARLOS, We’re leaving early. Let’s go!”

“What about breakfast?” Carlos asked, rushing down the stairs with his book bag in hand.

Ray handed him a package of pop-tarts that he swore he would get rid of and ushered all of the kids out the door.

Alex jumped out of the car the moment Ray pulled up to the high school and ran inside to find Luke. As always, Luke was in the music room strumming on his guitar and working on some song lyrics when Alex found him.

“He’s safe,” Alex said, out of breath from his sprint to the music room.

“Who’s safe?” Luke asked, putting his guitar down.

“Reggie, or at least I think he’s safe. He could still be in some crappy foster home, but the main point is that he’s not with Caleb anymore.”

“How do you know?” Luke asked, getting up from his seat.

“Ray told me that they’re shutting down Caleb. He’s out,” Alex said, tearing up.

“Oh, thank god,” Luke said, giving Alex the biggest hug.

The two boys stayed hugging for several minutes until the first bell rang. That’s when they sadly broke apart and headed to their respective classrooms to take their final exams.

Ray's heart ached as he looked at the pale, brown-haired boy seated next to him in his car. His eye was black and blue, and he had a cut on his lip. Ray could tell that he was scared out of his mind.

His heart broke as he watched the boy clutch onto a Walmart bag that seemed to hold what little he owned. While he was trained for scenarios like this, he never thought he would actually have a placement that practically came with nothing. He didn't understand why as well. Alex had shown up with a duffle bag filled with clothes and a few personal belongings.

"Are you sure you have everything?" Ray asked, hoping the kid had maybe forgotten something in the house.

The boy just timidly shook his head, not even bothering to look up at him.

He put the key into the ignition and exhaled as he started his car. Right before he grabbed the steering wheel, he looked over at the boy and smiled at him.

"Have you eaten anything today?" Ray asked, hoping to break the ice.

The boy timidly shook his head.

"Okay," he said calmly. "Well, we have about a 45-minute drive ahead of us, and I haven't had a chance to eat since breakfast; why don't we grab something to eat on the road?"

Ray looked at the boy, hoping to get some kind of response from him. But again, nothing.

"What would you want to get?" Ray asked, hoping to get a verbal answer from the boy.

"I'm okay with whatever you want," the boy said timidly.

Ray sighed. While yes, he did receive a verbal answer, he still felt like he wasn't getting through with the boy.

"How about we grab a burger?" He asked, hoping the boy would like his suggestion.

"Okay," the boy said, keeping his expression stoic.

"Well then, let's get out of here," he said, putting his car into drive.

Ray had a feeling that it was going to take some time to get through to this boy. It wasn't easy with Alex, and he had a feeling it was going to be even harder this time.

As Ray pulled out of the group home's driveway, the boy looked back at the building he lived in for two years and hoped that he would never have to see those doors again.

The boy looked at the house in awe as Ray pulled into the driveway. The house was nicer and bigger than any of the previous foster homes that he had lived in. Ray grabbed the trash from their burger run and threw it in the outside bin. He watched as the boy slowly got out of the car and walked towards the house, taking everything in.

Ray opened the door to the smell of fresh-baked cookies, and two of his children were having a heated discussion at the kitchen table.

"I don't understand why you signed up for three AP classes if you didn't want to do the work?" Julie asked.

"The workload isn't the issue," Alex said, putting his head down on the table. "It's the fact that he gave us homework to do over the break."

"You'll live," Julie said, nudging his shoulder.

Ray didn't want to interrupt the conversation between the two, but he thought it was best to introduce them to their newest family member.

"Guys," he said, patting the boy on the shoulder. Both of his kids turned their attention to him. Alex's face immediately turned white. "This is—"

"-Oh my god, Reggie!" Alex said, leaping up from his chair and sprinting toward the brown-haired boy.

He immediately engulfed him into a hug before the poor boy had any idea of what was happening.

"I can't believe it's actually you," he said, tearing up.

"A-Alex?" Reggie said in disbelief. "Is it really you?"

Alex hugged the boy tighter, not wanting to let him go.

"Yeah, buddy," he said through his tears. "It's really me."

The two stayed engulfed in their hug for a few minutes. Neither one of them wanted to pull away. At that point, Julie had figured out exactly how Reggie and Alex knew each other.

"I'm just so relieved that you're safe," Alex said, pulling away from the hug to wipe his eyes.

"So, it's safe here?" he asked, reassuringly.

"Yeah, you're safe here. The Molina's are safe."

Reggie gave the biggest sigh of relief. For the first time in years, he was starting to feel safe truly.

"What happened to your face?" Alex asked as he went to take a better look at the boy.

"Caleb got mad at me the other day," he said.

Alex suspected more to the story, but he didn't want to push the subject further. Especially with Julie and Ray present.

"Do you want me to go call Luke?" Julie asked, not wanting to interrupt the moment between the two. However, she had a feeling that this was something that Luke needed to be apart of.

"L-Luke's here?" Reggie asked, surprised that the two had managed to stay together.

"He's back with his parents," Alex reassured him. "But, they only live fifteen minutes away."

"He's over here all the time," Ray interjected.

"Oh, thank god!" Reggie said, giving Alex another hug.

At that moment, Julie slipped out of the living room to call Luke. She couldn't wait to get these three boys back together again.

Chapter 2 is finished! I'm so sorry for hurting Reggie! I was planning on finishing this part yesterday afternoon, but I kept having a hard time writing sad Reggie since he's usually so bubbly and happy.

Let me know what you guys think, and feel free to give me suggestions as to what should happen in the later chapters!

Also, what do you guys think happened at the group home?

Chapter 3: Photos on the Wall

Chapter Summary

Reggie gave Alex a small smile. He couldn't remember the last time he had a photo of himself hung on a wall. None of his other foster families even bothered to include him in their family pictures, and Caleb sure as hell didn't even bother to try and photograph any of the moments at the boy's home. Even his own parents didn't bother to take pictures of him growing up. They were always too preoccupied with their own lives and never took any happy family photos.

To Reggie, this seemed like a happy home, one where he could actually be included in family activities.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hey, this is Luke. I can't come to the phone right now, but you should probably just text me like a normal human being anyway.

Julie sighed in frustration. That was the fourth time she had called his phone, and there was still no answer. Luke was always over. Half the time, Ray couldn't even get the boy to leave. Yet, the one time Luke is asked not to hang out at the Molina residence, he is unreachable.

Julie: 911 - You need to get here now!

Luke: I can't... I have mandatory family therapy

Julie: I don't care leave early. THIS IS IMPORTANT

Luke: my mom drove me here just so I couldn't do that 🙄 besides, you haven't even told me what's going on

Julie looked down at her phone for a few moments contemplating her next move. She knew if she told him that Reggie was here, then he would harass his mom into letting him leave and race over here, but at the same time, she wanted to see his face when he found out that Reggie was here. She glanced into the living room to find Alex and Reggie sitting on the couch. Reggie kept trying to squirm away from Alex, but Alex refused to let go. It was sweet. Luke needed to know that Reggie was safe now.

Luke: We're getting called back. I'll head over once this is finished

Julie sighed as she saw the text from Luke. She couldn't believe that she had screwed this up. However, family therapy was one request his mom made when he came home, and at the moment, it was the only thing assuring her that Luke wouldn't run away again.

"So, Luke will be over in a couple of hours," Julie said, walking back into the living room. "He has a family commitment that he can't get out of."

"Thanks, uh-" Reggie said, realizing that the two were never properly introduced.

"Right, sorry. I'm Julie," she said, smiling.

"It's nice to meet you," Reggie said, giving a small smile. "I'm Reggie."

"Where's Carlos?" Ray asked, looking at Julie and Alex once he realized that he was missing a child.

Julie and Alex looked at each other for a brief moment. Both of them had a hint of guilt on their faces.

"He was kind of destroying the kitchen while we were cleaning up the cookie stuff," Alex said, looking over at Julie.

"So we told him to go see if he could sense any ghost around the neighborhood," Julie finished.

Ray gave Julie and Alex a disappointed sigh.

"If it helps, we told him to be back by three," Alex said.

"I guess we'll just introduce you to Carlos once he gets back," Ray sighed, turning to Reggie. "In the meantime, I'll show you to your bedroom."

Reggie slowly nodded his head as he grabbed his Walmart bag and got up off the couch to follow Ray towards his bedroom, with Alex not far behind. Reggie noticed a plethora of family photos plastered along the wall as the three made their way through the house. Most of the photos were of Julie, and a boy, whom Reggie assumed was Carlos, some of them included Ray, and others had the three of them with a woman he hadn't been introduced to. As they made their way up the

stairs, Reggie stopped when he saw a photo of Alex, Julie, Carlos, and Ray at the beach. He looked at the photo and smiled briefly. They looked like a real family.

"We took that photo on the first day of summer break," Alex said. "I had just gotten into the music program at our school, and we went out to celebrate."

Reggie gave Alex a small smile. He couldn't remember the last time he had a photo of himself hung on a wall. None of his other foster families even bothered to include him in their family pictures, and Caleb sure as hell didn't even bother to try and photograph any of the moments at the boy's home. Even his own parents didn't bother to take pictures of him growing up. They were always too preoccupied with their own lives and never took any happy family photos.

To Reggie, this seemed like a happy home, one where he could actually be included in family activities.

The trio stopped at the last room in the hallway. Ray smiled at Reggie as he opened the door to the bedroom. The room only consisted of a queen-sized bed, a small wooden desk, and a dresser, but Ray had planned to let Reggie make it his own over the next few weeks.

The poor boy looked around the room in awe, immediately heading over to the bed to feel how soft it is. He let out a small yawn as he laid down on the bed and slowly started to make a bed angel.

"I thought we could go shopping tomorrow?" Ray said, smiling at how the boy was enjoying his new bed. "We can get some new bedding and a few decorations to make this room feel a bit homier once we get you some new clothes."

"You don't have to do that," Reggie said, sitting up on the bed. "This is more than enough."

"Nonsense," Ray said. "Besides, we were planning on heading to the mall tomorrow anyway. Julie and Alex want to finish some last-minute holiday shopping, and then we are going to pick up our Christmas tree."

"If they have any left," Alex murmured.

"I told you," Ray said, turning to Alex. "Rose and I did this every year. We've never had a problem getting a tree before."

"Who's Rose?" Reggie asked.

Ray went quiet for a moment before he turned to Reggie. "Rose is my late wife. She died about a year and a half ago."

"I'm sorry," Reggie said, looking down. "I shouldn't have asked."

"No, no, Mijo, it's okay," Ray said, sitting down next to Reggie. "We've all had some time to process her death, but we're moving on. We always remember the happy memories that we shared."

"Okay," Reggie said, feeling a little better after asking about Rose.

"Well, um, I guess I will leave you to get settled for a little bit," Ray said, getting up off the bed. "I'm sure you and Alex have a lot to catch up on."

"A-a-actually," Reggie stammered. "Would it be okay if I took a shower?"

"Of course," Ray said, walking over to the door leading to the Jack and Jill bathroom beside the closet. "Do you have any clean clothes?"

The boy timidly shook his head.

"All of my clothes in here are dirty," Reggie said, gesturing to the Walmart bag on the bed. "But I can just put this back on; it's fine."

"Or you could just borrow something of mine," Alex suggested. "I know I'm a bit taller than you, but I'm sure I have something that would work."

"You don't have to-" Reggie started once again.

"-Reggie," Alex interrupted. "Let us help you."

"Sorry," the boy said quietly.

"Right, so feel free to use any of the toiletries in the shower," Ray said, going through a mental checklist. "Do you have a toothbrush?"

Reggie shook his head.

"What about deodorant?"

Again, the boy continued to shake his head.

"That's totally fine. I have extras of all of that in the hall closet. Let me just grab that for you."

"Thanks," Reggie said as Ray walked out the door.

"I'll go grab you something to wear," Alex said, walking out of the room as well.

Reggie sighed as he started to fully process everything that had happened the past couple of days. He hated feeling helpless. Usually, he could at least bring the bare necessities with him to a new placement, but Caleb had made it practically impossible for him to bring anything with to Molina's. It wasn't fair.

"So I grabbed you a couple of towels, as well as shower-poo," Ray said, setting the toiletries on Reggie's bed. "Let me know if I can get you anything else."

"Thanks," Reggie said. "For everything."

"No problem," he said, giving him a warm smile. "I'll be downstairs if you need anything else."

Reggie gave Ray a small smile as he watched the older man walk out of the room and close the door. Reggie got up off the bed and slowly started to undress. Most of what he was wearing had been hand-me-downs from a couple of other boys from the group home, and while he was appreciative of the clothes he did have, he was kind of glad that he was finally going to be able to go shopping tomorrow.

Maybe this home will be different, Reggie thought as he walked into the bathroom to take a shower. As he went to place his toiletries on the counter, he noticed a rainbow unicorn onesie sitting on top of the toilet seat. *Yeah, this home will definitely be different.*

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone!

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. I swear Reggie and Luke will be reunited in the next part. Reggie just needed to get settled in a bit more before Luke completely bombards him, haha.

The next chapter should be out within the next couple of days! However, in the meantime, feel free to let me know what you think or if you have any suggestions or theories as to what will happen next.

I love reading your comments, even if I don't always respond!

Chapter 4: Not A Good Fit?

Chapter Summary

That was the same excuse every foster parent made when they called his social worker. He just wasn't a good fit. After five foster placements, he was finally placed in a group home. And as Caleb always said, "No family is going to want to adopt you after you've been in a group home."

Chapter Notes

Sorry, this took me so long to update. I've been working more on Reggie's backstory and how this will affect his character and relationship with Ray moving forward. But I think I've figured it out and I'm excited for you guys to read this next chapter!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Reggie sighed as he felt the hot water run down his back. He couldn't remember the last time he had the privilege of taking a long hot shower. With Caleb, showers were always timed to conserve water, and usually, by the time Reggie was allowed his turn, the hot water had run out. Normally, that wasn't a bad thing, but freezing cold showers weren't exactly ideal when trying to relax before going to sleep.

As he stepped out of the shower and wrapped himself in the fuzzy towel that Ray had left for him, he started to wonder if all of this was too good to be true. Sure, Alex said that he was safe here, but what if they don't like him? What if they thought if he was weird or too hyperactive? What if they realized that he was a complete ditz and decided that they don't want to put up with that nonsense? I mean, it wouldn't be the first time a family had asked to have him removed because he somehow couldn't manage to think before he spoke. In fact, it's happened several times. Or maybe, just maybe, he wasn't meant to have a family. He somehow failed every attempt he's ever had to have a family so, who's saying he won't screw this up again.

Reggie was seven years old when his parents decided that it would be a good idea to ship him off to Oak House, an all-boys boarding school about an hour away from Los Angeles. Reggie wasn't exactly sure why his parents had sent him away. It could have been because he almost flunked the first grade, or it could have been because his parents

started fighting at all hours of the night. At the time, he was being optimistic and thought that the reason he was getting sent away was so that he didn't have to hear their insufferable screams late at night. But he was far from wrong.

Reggie's mom was the only one to drop him off at school; his dad didn't even bother saying goodbye. She walked him to his dorm room, hugged him, and then said goodbye; she didn't even bother helping him unpack. Luckily, Reggie didn't bring that much stuff, so it didn't take him that long to put his clothes away. He did have a little trouble making his bed, but he managed to do an okay job after about thirty minutes. At first, Reggie was excited about his new adventure. His new school had a music program where he could practically learn any instrument imaginable and plenty of kids around his age that he could play with. He couldn't wait until his parents came to visit so that he could show them his new life. He didn't realize the real reason he got sent to boarding school until Fall break.

During the third week of school, Reggie had received an email from his parents telling him that things were swamped at home and that they couldn't come and visit him. He told them it was okay and that instead, he would send emails about his time at school. He didn't find that odd since most of his friend's parents didn't get to visit their children either. While Reggie sat in the computer lab with his friends to send updates back to their parents, he couldn't help but notice a significant difference between his friend's parents and his. His friends were getting responses to their emails. By the time fall break rolled around, all of his friends had talked about how they were going camping or going to Disneyland with their families over the break. Instead of getting an email from his mom about plans for a family trip, he was told by one of the dorm parents, Alan, that both of his parents were unable to take a week off to spend fall break with him. Instead, he was going to have to stay on campus during fall break.

Reggie could tell that Alan was not happy about having to cancel his vacation, but the two still made the most of their time together. Reggie spent his days inside the music room practicing the piano and watching youtube tutorials about playing the banjo, an instrument he got quite good at. At night, he and Alan would hang out in the television room and watch Star Wars. And for a while, during the school year, while all of his friends were spending time with their families, that was his normal. Just him and Alan alone in the school. He was pretty sure that his parents had forgotten about him.

The second time was when he was 9 years old and placed with his

first foster family, the Smiths. Things were going well for the first couple of months; he was starting to make friends at school, he was getting along with his foster brother Dylan, and his foster parents didn't yell at each other at night. That last bit was the only good part about not being allowed to be with his parents. But, fifth grade was tough, especially since nobody bothered to help him with his homework. His foster parents assumed that since Reggie had spent two years at boarding school, he should be pretty self-sufficient when it came to his school work. But that wasn't true. He constantly had teachers or dorm parents helping him with his school work and ensuring that he understood the material taught to him.

When his report card came in, his foster parents weren't pleased with his performance. They didn't understand; Reggie had gone to one of the best boarding schools in the state of California, he should have easily been able to keep up at a normal public school. Instead of changing how they approached his schooling, his foster parents continued to become angry when receiving a poor grade on a test.

"Why are you so stupid," they would always say. "This material is easy; you should be able to understand it."

After a few months, the Smiths called his caseworker and told her, "Reggie just isn't a good fit for our family."

That was the same excuse every foster parent made when they called his social worker. He just wasn't a good fit. After five foster placements, he was finally placed in a group home. And as Caleb always said, "No family is going to want to adopt you after you've been in a group home."

"Okay, Reg, just don't get too comfortable," he said to himself as he was drying off. "This isn't permanent. They aren't going to keep you."

Once he was finished drying off, he quickly put on the underwear he was wearing before and changed into the unicorn onesie. He found Alex's brush and quickly ran it through his raven hair, hoping that the older boy wouldn't mind. Once he was looking presentable again, he turned off the light to the bathroom and went back into his new room.

Alex sighed relief as he walked back down the stairs and plopped down next to Julie on the couch. For the first time since he got to the Molina's, he could finally breathe easy knowing that Reggie is safe. He no longer had to worry if the boy was getting enough sleep or eating

properly. He could finally rest easy knowing that Reggie was finally with a family that cared.

"You look happy," Julie said, pausing the tv.

"Yeah," Alex said, giving Julie a small smile. "I'm just glad Reggie's okay. Luke and I were so worried, and we just thought-"

Alex paused for a moment. He never told Julie or Carlos about what went down at the Covington Home for Boys, and he liked that they were ignorant of the trauma that he had to endure. He didn't need Julie to worry about him, Luke, and now Reggie any more than she already was. When Alex first arrived at the Molina's, he could always see Julie's heartbreak whenever he or Luke talked about their past. She needed to keep her optimism about the world, and he didn't want to be the one to break that.

"We were afraid that he was going to be stuck there until he aged out," he said, looking down at his hands.

He wasn't lying; that was partially the truth; another part of him feared that Reggie had been fostered by another family that didn't want him, and he would continue to think that he wasn't good enough. He and Luke had managed to shake him out of that headspace while they were together, but he had a feeling that Reggie had fallen back into that mentality since they've been separated.

"Is he here?" Carlos said, running through the door.

"Yeah, he's upstairs showering," Julie said, smiling at her brother.

"Do you think he's gonna be a better big brother than you?" he said, eyeing Alex.

Alex gave Carlos a small laugh and reached up to grab him.

"Are you saying I'm not a good big brother?" Alex said, messing up his hair.

"Stop it," Carlos said, laughing. "You're okay. But you're always hanging out with Willie."

"That's not," Alex paused; maybe Carlos was right. He had been spending most of his free time with his boyfriend since they became official. Maybe he wasn't spending enough time with Carlos? "Okay, you have a point. How about we have a movie night in the studio

together on Sunday? Just the two of us."

"What about the new kid?" he asked. "I don't want him to feel left out."

"Do you want to invite him?" Alex asked, hoping the younger boy would want to include Reggie.

"Yeah, let's make it a boys-only movie night!" Carlos said, nodding his head. "Luke's not invited, though."

"I like that idea," Alex said, squeezing the boy.

"Did you guys give the new kid a tour of the house?" Carlos asked, escaping from Alex's hug.

"Not yet. We just showed him to his room," Julie said.

"Then come on," Carlos said, running towards the stairs. "Let's give him the grand tour."

"Not so fast, mijo," Ray said, coming into the living room. "I need to talk to you about something."

"If it's about the ghost hunting, Julie and Alex said it was okay," Carlos said, hoping he wasn't in trouble.

"No, that's not it at all," Ray said, motioning for him to take a seat in the living room. "Look, the new boy, Reggie, he was Alex and Luke's roommate while they were at the group home."

"Oh," Carlos said. His mood instantly started to deflate.

"He hasn't had the best childhood," Alex added. "But, he's a complete goofball once you get to know him."

"Hmmm," Julie said, nudging Carlos's shoulder. "That sounds like someone else I know."

"So just be patient with him. Okay, mijo?"

"Got it," Carlos said, nodding his head.

"Anything else we should know?" Ray said, turning to Alex.

"He's not the sharpest crayon in the box," he said. "Like, he's incredibly creative and oddly good with numbers, but his common sense isn't always there. So, just don't give him a hard time about it. Okay?"

"Duly noted," Ray said, patting his leg. "I'm gonna go make some hot chocolate. Could you go and check on Reggie? Make sure he's okay?"

Alex nodded his head and got up from the couch to head upstairs. This would be a new chapter for Reggie, and Alex couldn't wait to be a part of it.

Reggie lingered in his new bedroom after his shower for a few minutes, hoping to have a few moments of quiet instead of immediately going to find Alex. He walked over to his new bed, laid down, and rested his head on the fluffy pillows. Reggie could tell that this room was obviously a guest room before he arrived. The plain white bedsheets and the lack of clutter had given it away, but he didn't care. This was the first time that he had his own room since he had lived with his parents. He no longer had to listen to the snores of strangers sleeping beside him, and he finally had more than just two drawers to store all of his personal belongings. He probably wasn't going to be able to fill all of his drawers up, but the fact that he had space to store things meant a lot to him.

Knock Knock Knock

"Come in," he said, sitting up on the bed.

He smiled as he saw Alex walking in the door.

"That looks adorable on you," Alex said, sitting down on the edge of his bed.

"There are too many bright colors," Reggie said, looking down at the onesie.

"I know," Alex said, smiling. "Why do you think I gave it to you?"

Reggie gave a small pout as Alex pulled the hood of the onesie on top of his head.

"Anyway," Alex said, getting off the bed. "Ray is making hot chocolate, and Carlos is back from his little escapade. He wants to give you a tour of the house."

"Do we have to go right now?" Reggie said, laying back down on the bed. "I'm so comfy."

Alex got quiet for a few moments before he looked back at Reggie.

"Have you been sleeping?" Alex asked.

"A little bit," Reggie said, still lying down. "I got to sleep in a bed last night, so that's a plus."

Alex took a deep breath. He couldn't believe that not having a bed to sleep on had become a normal act for the fifteen-year-old. Alex could never figure out why Caleb's punishments were always harsher on Reggie than anyone else.

"That's not," he wanted to go on a rant about how not having a bed wasn't a normal thing for a kid. How he should be pissed that he had to endure two years of on and off cruel punishments, But that wouldn't help Reggie. What Reggie needed at the moment was a loving and supportive environment. "Okay. You know that's great that you got a bed last night. And now you get to have one every night."

"Yeah, hopefully," Reggie said, forcing a smile.

"No, not hopefully. You will definitely get to have a bed every night."

Alex hoped that the boy would finally start to understand that this home would be different. That Reggie would finally have a safe and loving family to support him. But, the reality was that Reggie was going to need more time to know that. He would need to fully trust Ray, Julie, and Carlos before he could let his guard down again.

"Come on," Alex said, gently pulling Reggie out of bed. "Let's go get some hot chocolate. I'm pretty sure there's whipped cream as well."

Reggie's head popped up at the mention of whipped cream. His eyes went wide, and he had a small smile on his face. Alex knew that Reggie loved whipped cream on his hot chocolate. One of his foster brothers used to put extra whipped cream on his hot chocolate after Reggie had a bad day at family court. It always brought back happy memories for him.

The two walked out of Reggie's bedroom and headed downstairs toward the kitchen. Reggie smiled at the comforting smell of hot chocolate as the two made their way into the kitchen.

"That smells amazing," Alex said, taking in a whiff of the sweet drink that was in the instant pot. "When will it be ready?"

"It's ready now, but I thought we could enjoy it after Carlos gives Reggie a tour of the house," Ray said, stirring the drink. "He'll keep bugging us about it until we actually get around to doing it. So, we might as well go ahead and get it over with."

Ray put the instant pot into keep warm mode and lead the two boys into the living room, where Carlos was eagerly waiting for Reggie to come in.

"Hi, I'm Carlos," he said, jumping off of the couch.

The quick movement startled Reggie a bit, but the boy quickly calmed down once he realized the eleven-year-old was harmless.

"Reggie," he said, giving a small smile. He couldn't understand why, but something about his new foster brother's hyper nature made him feel safe.

"Well, come on," Carlos said, gesturing for Reggie to follow him. "I want to give you a tour of the house."

While the house seemed big on the outside, Reggie was pleased to find that the house wasn't that fancy. It was large, yes, but it was still a simple family home. The downstairs consisted of the living room, kitchen, dining room, Ray's office, and a half bathroom, while the upstairs was mainly just bedrooms, bathrooms, and a storage closet that Ray needed to clean out. The clutter around the house really made it feel lived in and used.

"And then out here in the studio," Carlos said, ushering Reggie out the front door and towards a smaller loft-style building next to the house. "This used to be where my mom played piano and wrote music before she died. Now, it's just where Alex and Luke hang out when they want some alone time."

"Ahhh," Reggie said, nodding his head before Carlos opened the door.

Reggie's eyes opened in wonder as he walked into the studio. In the middle of the room lay a beautiful grand piano. He started walking towards it when his eyes lingered toward the other instruments in the room. There was a beautiful electric guitar, an acoustic guitar, a bass guitar, and a shiny drum set.

"Do you play?" Ray asked, walking into the studio and standing behind Carlos.

"Yeah," Reggie said, giving Ray a small smile. His hands started to grace the piano. "Or at least I used to. I haven't really had the opportunity to play much in the last two years."

"Well, feel free to use any of the instruments," Ray said, taking in the studio. "Although, I would ask Alex before you touch his drum set. He gets a little territorial."

"Thank you," Reggie said.

"Of course," Ray said, giving Reggie a small smile.

As the three made their way out of the studio and towards the front door. Reggie noticed an old Volkswagen Jetta pull up into the Molina's driveway. The car came to an immediate halt, and a boy with a mop of brown hair jumped out of the car without even bothering to take his keys out of the ignition.

"Reggie?" the boy asked, unsure if it was really him or not.

"Oh my god, Luke," Reggie said, sprinting toward the boy.

The two immediately engulfed in a hug, much like earlier when he and Alex reunited.

"I have been worried sick about you," Luke said as he pulled apart from the hug to get a better look at the boy. "What the hell happened to your face?"

"Caleb," Reggie said, looking down at the ground.

"I'm going to kill him," Luke said, giving an adorable pout.

"No, you're not," Alex said, walking out of the front door with Julie.

"Yeah, I don't think you're even capable of violence," Julie added.

"I am, too," Luke pouted. He turned to Julie. "Why didn't you tell me that Reggie was here. I would have just skipped family therapy?"

"Because," Julie said, giving a small pat on the chest. "Therapy's important. Now, go turn off your car and then you can come inside and join us for hot chocolate."

Luke glared at Julie as she ushered Reggie and the rest of her family inside the house. He gave a small huff before turning off his car so he could go and join the rest of the Molina family inside. Before he went

into the house, he gave a small sigh of relief. While he didn't show his anxiety the same way Alex did, Luke worried sick about Reggie. Now that he knew the boy was safe, he could finally sleep easy.

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, this chapter was a lot longer than my previous chapters, but there was a lot that I wanted to cover before we move on in the story. I hope you guys are enjoying this though! Let me know what you guys think and feel free to leave your predictions and suggestions in the comments!

P.S. This was just a sneak-peak into Reggie's backstory, you will definitely get more about his time in foster care as the story progresses.

Chapter 5: The Honeymoon Period

Chapter Summary

"Really, it's fine," Reggie said, opening the box. "Besides, I like feeling useful."

That was partially true. While, yes, Reggie didn't mind helping out around the house like a normal family member, particularly the kitchen since he did like to cook, he also felt like Ray would be more inclined to keep him long-term if he became the perfect child. That included being as helpful as he could be.

Ray, on the other hand, knew exactly what was going on. His friends Chad and Ryan went through the same process when they started fostering their now adopted son Nick, and he went through it with Alex. This was the honeymoon period. Alex's only lasted about a month before he broke down after his parents refused to see him again. After that, he became extremely moody and even more anxious than he already was. It would only be a matter of time before Reggie got truly comfortable with them. Until then, he was going just to ride this out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ray smiled as he watched Julie, Luke, Alex, and Reggie hang out in the living room. Luke and Alex immediately started cracking jokes with Reggie as if they hadn't just spent nine months worrying about the poor kid. A part of him knew that, realistically, both the boys wanted to talk with Reggie about what happened at the group home, but for now, they weren't bringing it up. Which he was thankful for because he didn't want to deal with three emotional teenage boys this afternoon.

So as the four kids talked in the living room, Ray figured now would be a good time to go upstairs and assess what he needed to get at the store for Reggie. His caseworker had given him a \$150 clothing voucher to Target, but because all of Reggie's belongings fit inside of a Walmart bag, he knew that wasn't even going to cover all of what they needed to buy. He immediately sighed when he opened up the Walmart bag. This kid really didn't have anything. Aside from a worn-out flannel and converse, he only owned one pair of black jeans, a

white t-shirt, two black shirts, and a black tank top, as well as a few pairs of socks and underwear. That was it.

He couldn't imagine what Reggie had probably gone through at that group home. However, judging from what little he had, he suspected that Caleb had at least been neglecting him for the past couple of years.

He never had to go on a massive shopping trip with Alex. He had come to them with at least two duffle bags worth of clothes and other personal belongings, but of course, no two foster kids are the same. There was no way Target was going to cover everything Reggie needed. Plus, he could already tell by looking at his clothes that they were most likely not going to find much that Reggie liked at Target. Probably a few graphic t-shirts at most.

So, Ray just pulled out his phone, made a small inventory of what Reggie had, and started the list of what they were definitely going to need to buy.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Luke said as he took a sip of his hot chocolate. Currently, the boys were filling Reggie in on all of the Los Feliz High School drama. "So first of all, I aced my drama monologue in class, and second, I found out what the spring musical is going to be!"

"I thought you hated musical theater?" Alex asked, taking a sip of his hot chocolate. "Julie and I tried to get you to watch The Greatest Showman last summer, and you kept saying that it was unrealistic and boring."

"I still stand by that," Luke said. "The story was pretty boring, and Troy Bolton just wasn't a good fit for Phillip Carlyle. But Mrs. Carson had the flu last month and was out for like a week, so we watched both Hamilton and Newsies, and I fell in love."

"Okay," Alex said, looking at Julie. He was hoping he could make sense of what was going on inside of Luke's mind.

"You do know that Troy is basically like Nick's uncle, right?" Julie asked, hoping to make the kid feel a bit embarrassed.

"Please tell me you're joking?"

"Yeah, both of his dads went to school with Troy. He and Chad were

like best friends," Alex added.

"How did you know this?" Luke said, feeling a bit dumb.

"I've been over to Nick's house like a dozen times with Carrie. There's a ton of pictures of his dad and Troy all over the house. It's a tad creepy."

"Anyway, getting back to the point. We're doing Newsies," Luke said, almost bouncing out of his seat. "And Nick's other dad agreed to choreograph!"

"Wait, are you serious?" Alex asked. "Ryan Danforth-Evans, the same man who has choreographed three Hollywood musicals, is going to choreograph a high school production of Newsies? I think I'm dreaming."

"Will your mom even let you audition?" Julie asked.

"She said I could as long as I keep my grades up," he said excitedly. "She's still insistent that I at least maintain good enough grades to get into college."

"Keeping your options open. I like it," Ray said as he walked downstairs and grabbed a couple of the empty mugs in the living room while holding Reggie's Walmart bag.

Reggie's eyes went wide when he noticed that Ray had all of his stuff. Shit! Did he screw up already? It had only been like what two hours? How did he manage to screw up a new placement so fast?

"I'm just going to wash your clothes, so you have something clean to wear in the morning," Ray said, reassuring Reggie after he noticed his panic.

"Right," Reggie said, releasing a deep breath. "Thanks."

"So we're all auditioning, right?" Julie asked the boys before she looked up at her dad. "We can audition, right?"

"Of course, Mija," Ray said, kissing the top of her head.

Julie and Alex gave each other a high five. The trio immediately began gushing over how they would start prepping for their auditions. Still, Reggie just sat back quietly and listened. After nine months of being apart from Alex and Luke, a part of him felt like they had

moved on without him. Sure, he was glad they got out and were able to have normal lives again. Still, he didn't really see how he would fit in while they were all at their fancy Performing Arts High School and he was most likely going to be stuck at his old school. They were going to spend all of their afternoons at rehearsal together at that school, and he would just be alone again.

Reggie slowly started to wake up to the smell of freshly brewed coffee and bacon, which was weird since Caleb only let the boys eat cereal in the morning. Coffee was a luxury only he was allowed to drink. But as Reggie opened his eyes, he realized that he was no longer at the group home.

He gave a small smile as he slowly sat up and stretched out his arms, popping a few joints as he did so. As he got out of bed, he noticed Alex and Luke sleeping on the floor, cuddling under a blanket. The two were supposed to sleep in Alex's room last night after Luke insisted that the boys needed to have a sleepover to celebrate the fact that they were all together again, but they must have fallen asleep. He debated whether he should wake the two boys up but decided against it since Luke hated getting up before noon and Alex was a heavy sleeper. Instead, Reggie decided to tiptoe out of the room and go downstairs to see if anyone else was awake.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he found Ray in the Kitchen humming along to a Selena song at a low volume. Ray seemed to be in a groove as he began to crack eggs in a bowl and scramble them with a whisk as he hummed along to 'Bidi Bidi Bom Bom.' Reggie started to walk back upstairs, not wanting to disturb the man, but he was stopped in his tracks when Ray noticed him while he was dancing.

"Good morning," Ray said, pouring the eggs in a pan. "How did you sleep last night."

"I slept fine, thanks," Reggie said, lingering in the hallway to the kitchen.

"Well, breakfast isn't quite ready yet, but can I get you some juice or coffee?" Ray asked, trying to make the boy feel comfortable.

He remembered how uncomfortable Alex was when he arrived. It took him a couple of weeks to start trusting Ray and Julie. Ray was hoping that it wouldn't take Reggie long since he has Alex here, but you never know.

"Juice is fine," Reggie said, walking into the kitchen.

"I'll get that right up," Ray said, walking towards the fridge. "You can have a seat at the table if you want?"

Reggie nodded his head and slowly started to walk toward the table. Ray smiled at Reggie as he poured the drink for him.

"So, you're an early riser," Ray said, trying to make conversation.

"Yeah, kind of a force of habit," Reggie said, taking a sip of his juice.

He knew better than to immediately push the boy into sharing more than he wanted right now. He had learned that mistake with Alex, making the poor kid almost have a panic attack after coaxing him to talk about what happened at the group home. It was better to keep things light and let him come to you in his own time.

"Yeah," Ray said, keeping the conversation going. "It's almost impossible to wake Julie and Carlos in the mornings. And now that I think about it, Alex should be awake by now."

"He might not have had the best night's sleep," Reggie said with a slight smirk on his face. "He and Luke fell asleep on the floor beside my bed."

"Ahhh," Ray said, scrambling the eggs. "That explains it."

The two remained quiet for a few moments. Ray continued to cook the eggs, and Reggie just slowly sipped on his juice when he noticed a pancake box on the counter.

"Do you want some help making breakfast?" Reggie asked.

"You don't have to do that," Ray said. He figured the poor kid had been worked to death by Caleb these last couple of years. He wanted to give the kid at least a couple of weeks off.

"No, it's fine," Reggie said, getting up from the table and grabbing the pancake box. "One of my foster sisters wanted to go to culinary school, so she showed me how to make amazing pancakes."

"Are you sure," Ray asked. "You really don't have to do that."

"Really, it's fine," Reggie said, opening the box. "Besides, I like feeling useful."

That was partially true. While, yes, Reggie didn't mind helping out around the house like a normal family member, particularly the kitchen since he did like to cook, he also felt like Ray would be more inclined to keep him long-term if he became the perfect child. That included being as helpful as he could be.

Ray, on the other hand, knew exactly what was going on. His friends Chad and Ryan went through the same process when they started fostering their now adopted son Nick, and he went through it with Alex. This was the honeymoon period. Alex's only lasted about a month before he broke down after his parents refused to see him again. After that, he became extremely moody and even more anxious than he already was. It would only be a matter of time before Reggie got truly comfortable with them. Until then, he was going just to ride this out.

Reggie frowned once he noticed that the only step for the pancake mix was just to add water, but he insisted on doing his job. Now, if only he could find the measuring cups.

Ray smiled at Reggie as he started looking around the kitchen. He never got around to showing Reggie where everything was. He quickly poured the eggs into a bowl and then put a lid over them to stay warm before pulling out the measuring cups from a drawer.

"Thanks," Reggie said, smiling.

"No problem," Ray said, whipping his hands on a towel. "How about you make the batter, and I can flip the pancakes? Does that work?"

"Sure," Reggie said, giving Ray a small smile.

"Perfect! Let me just get you a bowl."

Reggie smiled at Ray as he quickly maneuvered around the kitchen to grab both a bowl and a whisk for the pancake batter. Once he set the utensils down on the counter, Reggie quickly got to work on preparing the instant batter. It was nice. None of his other foster parents had ever bothered to actually spend one on one time with him, and Ray seemed to actually want to spend some time with him.

Then Ray's phone rang.

Ray quickly took out his phone and frowned at the caller ID. It was Drew, Alex's caseworker. He knew getting a call from this number on a Saturday meant that something was wrong.

"I'll be right back," he said to Reggie as he stepped out of the kitchen and into his office.

Alex's social worker only called for two reasons, to schedule their monthly check-ins and to tell Ray that Alex's parents still weren't ready to see him. Although, to be honest, he was hoping this phone call would be different. Alex had been hoping to schedule a visitation with his parents and brothers for Christmas, and he knew the boy would be heartbroken if his parents wouldn't allow it.

"Hey Drew, what's up?" Ray said, taking a seat in his office chair.

"So, I just spoke with Alex's parents," Drew said disappointingly.

Ray sat back in his chair and pinched the bridge of his nose. He knew exactly where this was about to go.

"So they still don't feel comfortable with Alex having any contact with them or his brother Jackson at the moment," Drew said over the phone.

This is what Ray was afraid of. Alex just wanted to make amends with his parents, and they won't even give him a chance. He couldn't imagine Julie or Carlos not being allowed to talk with each other for almost a year. Even though they constantly got on each other's nerves, they were still extremely close.

"But, his older brother Daniel just turned 18, and he wants to meet with Alex before Christmas if that's possible," Drew said more positively.

"That's great," Ray said, pulling up his calendar. "I have a meeting with another caseworker at noon on Monday, but other than that, he can meet with Daniel anytime."

"Daniel requested Monday at 3:00 at Eats and Beats. Does that work?"

"Yeah, I'll let him know when he wakes up," Ray said, putting the date in his calendar.

"Okay, then I will see you then," Drew said before he hung up the phone.

This was good news. This was very good news. Maybe now Alex could start to get the closure that he needs.

Ray stepped out of his office and walked back into the kitchen to find Reggie pouring the pancake batter onto the griddle.

"Here, I'll take over that," Ray said, grabbing a spatula from one of the drawers.

"Is everything okay?" Reggie said, taking a seat at the table.

"Yeah, everything's fine," Ray said. "So we are about to start our week of Christmas festivities. Do you have any holiday traditions that you would like us to include? I believe Alex requested that we make as much gingerbread as humanly possible on Thursday."

"I don't really have any," Reggie said.

"Oh," Ray said, a bit sad.

"Yeah, my parents were too busy working and arguing with each other to really do Christmas when I was little. And then most of my foster families didn't bother to include me, so..."

Ray had expected Reggie not to have celebrated the holidays while he was at Caleb's. Still, the fact that his other foster parents didn't include him in their holiday festivities was just really unfair. The moment you take a foster kid in, he's supposed to be a part of your family in every aspect.

"I'm sorry about that," Ray said.

"But I'm fine, really. You guys don't have to do anything for me," Reggie said, taking a sip of his juice. "I know I just got here, and the holidays are really expensive-"

"Nonsense," Ray said, flipping the pancakes. "Every kid gets a visit from Santa in this house."

"Oh," Reggie said, a bit surprised.

The Molina's were going to actually spend money on him. This was new.

"I need coffee," A half-asleep Alex said, with Luke practically sleepwalking beside him.

"Good morning, you two," Ray said, getting two coffee mugs down for the boys.

Alex immediately picked up the empty coffee mugs and started pouring him and Luke the biggest cup of coffee. Luke followed behind and pulled out two bottles of coffee creamer from the fridge, one peppermint mocha and the other hazelnut. He handed Alex the peppermint mocha creamer in exchange for the other coffee. This was a routine that the boys had down to a science.

"So, how did you boys sleep?" Ray asked, already knowing the answer.

Luke just gave in a grumpy look. Ray was playing with them, and it wasn't fun this early in the morning.

"Actually, could you and Reggie go wake up Julie and Carlos for me?" Ray asked Luke as he put another batch of pancakes on the griddle. "Breakfast is just about ready."

"Fine," Luke huffed before he headed upstairs to go wake up Julie and Carlos. Reggie easily complied. He had a feeling that the phone call earlier was about Alex. He just hoped that he wasn't leaving yet.

"So your social worker called this morning," Ray said the moment he and Alex were alone.

"Let me guess, my parents still don't want to see me," Alex said, sitting down at the table.

"I'm so sorry, mijo," Ray said, sitting down beside him.

"You know, at this point, I don't even care about seeing my parents. I just want to see Danny and Jack."

"Actually, that's what I wanted to talk to you about," Ray said. "Danny just turned 18, and he wants to meet with you."

"Really?" Alex asked, not sure if this was actually going to happen. It had almost been a year since he had seen his brothers. "I get to see Danny?"

"Yeah, your parents can't stop him from visiting you now that he's 18," Ray said.

"When do I get to see him?" Alex asked excitedly.

"Monday at three," Ray said, smiling.

"That's so soon," Alex said, getting up from the table. "I-I still need to

get him and Jack a Christmas gift. But like what do I get a 13-year-old?"

"Relax," Ray said. "We're going shopping after breakfast, so I'm sure you can find something for them this afternoon."

"Okay," Alex said, taking a deep breath as he took a sip of his coffee. Things were going to be okay.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry I haven't updated in a bit. I've had a bit of writer's block. But this is also the first step into Alex's storyline in the fic. So I wanted to make sure I had everything planned out perfectly. Side note, what Newsies Character do you think I'm going to cast everyone as?

Chapter 6: You Can Be Whoever You Want To Be

Chapter Summary

Rose's family wasn't exactly on board when Ray announced that they would start the foster care process, and they still were not on board when Ray got Alex, his first placement. They weren't sure how this blue-eyed, blonde-haired teenager was going to fit in their family. But as time went on, Alex grew on them. He and Luke even helped Julie find her love of music again. That was when Rose's family really started to change their minds on the whole situation. They even surprised Alex with his own Christmas stocking at Thanksgiving once they learned that his family was refusing to have any contact over the holidays. Victoria and a few other members of Rose's family even agreed to get their respite license if he had to go out of town for work and someone needed to watch the kids. Surely they were going to welcome Reggie into their family with open arms.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Taking five kids shopping during the holiday season wasn't exactly Ray's idea of a fun Saturday. But, it had to be done. Reggie needed new clothes, and Ray also needed to find some Christmas presents for him. He was pretty sure this kid had never been in a safe and supportive home, and he was going to make sure that Reggie would finally know what it's like to have a loving and supportive family. This is where his late wife's sister came in. Tia Victoria was the perfect person to help Ray wrangle five kids at the mall during the holidays. The only problem, he hadn't exactly told her that he had taken in another kid yet.

Now, Ray was going to tell her the day that Reggie arrived, but after the emotional reunion between Alex, Luke and Reggie, Ray felt like it was best to just hold off on his sister-in-law's very nurturing tone. He didn't want to scare Reggie on his first night. But now, she needed to know. So, while the kids were eating breakfast, Ray quietly snuck off to his office to call his overprotective sister-in-law.

"Hola, Ray. ¿Qué pasa?" Victoria said, picking up the phone.

"So, I need your help with something today," Ray said.

"Did Carlos terrorize the neighbor's cat again?" Victoria said in an exhausted tone. "Ay, Dios Mío, I swear if that boy doesn't behave then-"

"-Relax," Ray said, calming down his sister-in-law. "Carlos didn't do anything."

Ray took a deep breath. He wasn't sure how he was going to break the news that he took in another foster kid. You see, his wife's family wasn't exactly on board with him becoming a foster parent after Rose died. They felt like he and the kids needed more time to grieve her death rather than take in some kid off the street. But, this was something that he and Rose had been talking about before her diagnosis. They were planning to start the foster care process once her treatment ended, but she pushed Ray to do it without her when she got the news that she was terminal.

"Every kid deserves a safe and loving home. I know you can provide that without me," Rose said before she died.

So, after Rose had passed, he gave the kids six months to process her death before he asked them if it would be okay if they started to expand their family through foster care. Carlos was immediately on board. He loved the idea of possibly getting a new brother to hang out and play video games with. Julie, on the other hand, was a bit hesitant.

Julie was very close with her mother. That's where she got her love of music from. The two used to sit around the piano for hours playing and singing together. When Rose died, it was like a part of Julie had died with her. She stopped playing the piano; she stopped singing; she stopped loving music. It pained him to see her daughter grieve for such a long time. But they needed to move on. It's what Rose would have wanted. Ray was so sure that Julie wasn't going to be on board with taking on any new kids, that was until she talked to Nick Danforth-Evans.

It was no secret that the Hollywood it-couple Ryan and Chad Danforth-Evans had adopted Nick from foster care when he was 10. The two were very vocal about the process on social media. They were always open to talk about their struggles with the foster care and adoption process. Julie and Nick weren't exactly close; in fact, they never even spoke until Nick found her in the hallway crying after

another failed attempt to perform in front of her music class.

"Are you okay?" Nick asked, sitting down next to Julie.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Julie said, quickly wiping her face to hide the fact that she was crying.

"Look, if it helps, I kind of know what you're going through," Nick said.

"Really?" Julie asked, looking up at the boy.

"Yeah, my dad died when I was seven, and my mom died when I was a baby," Nick said sympathetically.

"Oh," Julie said, a bit surprised.

Nick had never mentioned why he had been adopted at an older age. It was just a fact that he was. Nobody even dared to ask why because they figured they would get the wrath of Chad Danforth-Evans and nobody wanted to mess with him.

"How'd you move on?" Julie asked, hugging her knees to her chest.

"It just kind of happened over time," Nick said. "My dads helped a bunch, though. When I first moved in with them, they gave me enough space to grieve properly. But they also pushed me to move forward with my life."

"Yeah, I think my dad is trying to push us forward," Julie said, tearing up a bit. "He wants us to start fostering."

"Really?" Nick said, a bit surprised.

"Yeah, my mom always wanted more kids after Carlos, but they had trouble getting pregnant. They were going to start the foster care process, but then she got sick."

"You guys should do it," Nick said, putting his hand on Julie's knee. "Your dad obviously wouldn't bring up the process unless he thought you and your brother were ready. And I might be a bit biased here, but older kids would jump at the opportunity to have a stable home environment, even if it's a little broken."

"I'll think about it," Julie said, giving Nick a small smile.

"Let me know what you decide," Nick said, getting up off the floor.

"My dads will be happy to help you guys every step of the way."

That's where the friendship between the Molina's and the Danforth-Evans family began. Julie took two days to think things over before she came to dad and agreed to start the process of becoming a registered foster family. And true to Nick's word, his dad's were with them every step of the way. They helped them with the endless amount of paperwork needed to begin their training. They recommended a support group for foster parents and even helped them prepare the house for their first placement.

Rose's family wasn't exactly on board when Ray announced that they would start the foster care process, and they still were not on board when Ray got Alex, his first placement. They weren't sure how this blue-eyed, blonde-haired teenager was going to fit in their family. But as time went on, Alex grew on them. He and Luke even helped Julie find her love of music again. That was when Rose's family really started to change their minds on the whole situation. They even surprised Alex with his own Christmas stocking at Thanksgiving once they learned that his family was refusing to have any contact over the holidays. Victoria and a few other members of Rose's family even agreed to get their respite license if he had to go out of town for work and someone needed to watch the kids. Surely they were going to welcome Reggie into their family with open arms.

"We took in an emergency placement yesterday," Ray said, sitting down at his desk.

"Another one?" Victoria asked in disbelief.

"Look before you say anything, he had been in the same group home as Alex and Luke for the past two years. His social worker was having trouble placing him with a foster family because of all the trauma he endured. They were about to place him in another group home. I wasn't about to let that happen."

"That's not what I meant," Victoria said, hoping Ray wasn't getting in over his head. "Are you sure you can handle four kids?"

"Yeah, I think so," Ray said, looking into the kitchen to see his four kids talking at the table. While Reggie still wasn't completely comfortable in his home yet, he knew the moment that he picked him up at the group home that Reggie was meant to be his. Now he just needs to prove to Reggie that he's worthy of being his dad.

"So what's he like?"

Ray smiled. He was so glad that she was on board to help.

Reggie stared in the mirror inspecting his eye. Caleb had given him the black eye the day he got arrested, and it seemed to look worse every single day. Too bad he didn't have anything to help cover it up.

"So," Luke said, plopping down on Reggie's bed. "What are we shopping for today?"

"Uh, clothes?" Reggie asked, a tad bit confused as he put on his freshly washed black t-shirt.

"I know that you dork," Luke said, playfully pushing his shoulder. "I meant what kind of clothes are we looking for. You know what's your style."

"I'm pretty sure it's just flannel," Alex said, walking into the room. "He literally wore every one of your flannel shirts while we were at the group home."

"And they all looked great," Reggie added.

"Maybe he can just steal your look," Alex said, eyeing Luke's outfit. As usual, he was wearing some type of rock band t-shirt with the sleeves off. "Reggie can totally pull off the sleeveless lifestyle."

Luke frowned at them both. For once, he was serious. Ray had just informed the boys that Julie's Aunt would be joining them on this trip, and he was trying to spend as little time with her as possible. She scared him.

"I'm serious, you guys," Luke started. "Reg, this is your chance to finally be able to express yourself through your clothes."

Alex raised his eyebrows at Luke. For once, the young wannabe rockstar was actually making sense. Caleb had been mistreating Reggie for two years, and during that time, he made Reggie wear clothes that all of the older boys grew out of. He never once got to shopping for something new and something of his own. He needed to find his voice.

"He's right," Alex said, sitting down beside Reggie. "You don't have to wear someone else's hand-me-downs now. You can be whoever you

want to be."

Reggie sat there for a few moments. He wasn't sure who he was at this point in his life. All he knew was that he wanted a place to belong. A place where he could feel comfortable experimenting with new styles. A place where he could come home after a long day and feel wanted. A place to call home. Maybe once he found his home, then he could start to find himself.

Victoria had come up with the perfect plan to keep Reggie occupied and oblivious as they broke off to go shop for his Christmas presents. Alex knew the most about Reggie, plus he insisted that he needed to go find gifts for his brothers, so he and Julie were going to meet up with Victoria after they all went to Target while Luke and Carlos stayed behind to help Reggie find some new clothes, school supplies, and knick-knacks for his bedroom. Everyone had been informed of the plan, well, everyone but Reggie.

Ray had told Reggie that this was just going to be a casual shopping trip so that they could get all of the necessities needed to start the next semester. He also told him that Julie still needed to find Carlos's Christmas present, so they were going to break away from the group for a while to go shop. Reggie reluctantly agreed. He was hoping that he could spend the whole day with Alex and Luke, but he supposed Luke was better when it came to clothes shopping. They kind of had a similar style despite Luke's distaste for sleeves.

Reggie's eyes widened when he got to the graphic t-shirt section at Target. There were so many to choose from. Reggie immediately looked over all of his options, ranging from band shirts to movie shirts and some with just a simple design on them.

"You have to get this one," Luke said, holding up a black and yellow Nirvana shirt.

"That is the eighth band shirt you've pulled for him," Alex said, shaking his head. "He can't just wear those all the time."

"What's wrong with wearing band shirts?" Luke asked.

"Nothing," Alex sighed. "But he needs a variety of clothes. Not just Nirvana and Prince shirts."

"But they're so cool," Luke whined.

Alex sighed. While he knew there was no point in arguing with Luke. The two could bicker back and forth for hours and get nowhere. However, this wasn't about them; it was about what Reggie wanted.

"What do you think?" Alex asked, turning to Reggie for his opinion.

Reggie looked over the shirt and liked the simplicity of it. He knew that he could easily pair it with a pair of converse and his red flannel. He quickly nodded his head as he added the shirt to the cart with several other clothes he needed to try on.

After much deliberation from Luke, they moved away from the band section of the graphic t-shirts. Ray was pretty sure they were just about ready to try on clothes when Reggie stopped in front of a display of Star Wars shirts.

Star Wars had turned into a comfort series for Reggie. Despite all of the family drama going down in his life, he would usually watch a Star Wars movie when things got a little too overwhelming for him. He hadn't been able to do that at Caleb's, though.

"These look pretty cool," Ray said, picking out three shirts. "Why don't we try a few on."

Reggie reluctantly nodded his head as Ray put the shirts in the cart.

"Are you ready to go try some stuff on?" Ray asked, noticing the cart was getting pretty full. He double-checked his list with the cart to make sure that they had grabbed underwear, socks, and a few pajama bottoms.

Reggie nodded his head, and they were off to the dressing room where he knew he was going to have to whittle down his graphic t-shirt collection. Despite Luke's push to get most of the band t-shirts, Reggie decided to only get two of them. The rest of his shirts were either just plain black, white, or gray t-shirts. Reggie looked at the three Star Wars shirts Ray had picked up one more time as he was sorting through the clothing that he wanted to put back. He liked the shirts, but he wasn't sure if he was ready to accept the comfort that Star Wars gave him, plus he knew that they were probably spending way more than however much was on that voucher. He could wait on the shirts. Reggie was about to put them back when Ray stopped him.

"Why don't we get these as well," Ray said, putting the shirts in the cart.

"It's too much," Reggie said, pulling the shirts out of the cart. "You guys don't have to spend this much money on me."

"Reggie," Ray said, looking at him in the eye. "Money is not an issue here. I just want to make sure that you have everything that you need. Which includes a variety of t-shirts that you are actually going to wear."

So, Reggie was right. The Molina's were definitely going to spend money on him, which means that Ray wasn't just fostering him for the paycheck. Then why were the Molina's fostering?

"Come on," Ray said, pushing the full shopping cart. "Let's go check out and then head over to the mall."

Reggie gave Ray a small smile.

Luke looked over to Julie. Her family was going all out for Christmas this year. How exactly could they afford this? Ray was a single dad with four kids on a photographer's salary. He knew that if his parents were in the same position, then they definitely wouldn't be able to afford to buy Reggie a whole new wardrobe and give him an amazing Christmas morning.

"How are you guys paying for all this?" Luke whispered to Julie.

Alex immediately hit him in the arm. Good intentions or not, it wasn't okay to ask about money.

"Dude, you can't just ask her that!" He sighed and turned to Julie. "I'm sorry about him. He thinks it's okay to ask wildly inappropriate questions."

"It's fine. My mom released a string of successful Christmas songs in the late 90s," Julie stated. "We get a hefty sum of royalties for them every year. She made my dad promise that he would never stinge on Christmas."

"Wait, so you guys are rich?" Luke asked.

"I'm mean, we're not as wealthy as Carrie," Julie said, following her dad and to the check-out station. "But we're comfortable."

"That's something only a rich person would say," Luke said, giving a small pout.

"You asked," Alex said, pulling Luke along with him towards the check-out station.

Chapter End Notes

A new part is up!!!! I wanted to get this chapter finished before my birthday on the 26th, and I successfully did get it finished an hour and a half before midnight! Let me know what you guys think!

Chapter 7: Shop Til You Drop

Chapter Summary

As soon as Julie and Alex met up with Tia Victoria, Luke insisted that the first thing he, Reggie, Ray, and Carlos needed to shop for was flannels. Reggie had a history of stealing his flannels in the past, not that he minded, Reggie needed new clothes at the time, and for some reason, Caleb was refusing to take him shopping. However, he was hoping that if Reggie could get a collection of his own, then maybe his flannels would be safe, and they wouldn't go missing.

Reggie's eyes widened at the black and white flannel that Luke had pulled. When he had a choice in wardrobe, he usually tended to lean towards darker colors, so this shirt was definitely in his color range.

At this rate, Ray was going to have to buy just about every flannel shirt in the store. Not that he minded, but he was hoping that Reggie would have a little more variety in his wardrobe. So far, the kid had only picked out a couple of pairs of black ripped jeans, two pairs of ripped dark wash jeans, a bunch of solid black, white, and grey shirts, a few graphic t-shirts, and now a plethora of flannel shirts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The moment Victoria laid eyes on Reggie, her heart immediately broke for the poor boy. His split lip and black eye were just one indicator of how this boy had been mistreated at the group home. His slender frame also told her that he probably hadn't been properly fed. All of that was going to change, though, because while Ray might not be the best chef in the world, she brought over dinner more than enough to ensure these kids get a nice home-cooked meal that wasn't her brother-in-law's signature spaghetti.

"Tia Victoria," Carlos yelled, running toward his aunt.

"Hola, mi cariño," Victoria said, giving Carlos, Julie, Alex, and Ray a big hug.

"Hey, thanks for meeting us," Ray said, giving her a big hug.

“Of course,” she said, giving a small smile. “Anything to help my favorite brother-in-law.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s your only brother-in-law,” Alex said sarcastically.

Victoria gave Alex a playful swat on the head. For as much as this child has gone through, Victoria loved that Alex never lost his sense of humor and sarcasm. He was pretty much the sassiest member of the Molina clan.

Victoria then turned to Reggie and gave him a slight smile.

“You must be Reggie,” Victoria said, going in for a hug. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Reggie was taken back a bit by the hug, but he wasn’t going to reject it. This was an important person in Ray, Julie, and Carlos’s life. If he was going to stay here, then she needed to like him as well.

He couldn’t get separated from Alex and Luke again.

“So I’m going to purchase three of his big presents later this week,” Ray said, pulling Victoria aside. “For the most part, though, just follow Alex’s guidance. He seems to know the most about Reggie.”

“Got it,” Victoria said.

“Carlos will text Julie or Alex anything that seems to catch his eye while we’re shopping,” Ray said, going through a mental checklist. “I feel like I’m forgetting something, though.”

“Relájate,” Victoria said, trying to calm Ray down. “Everything is going to be fine. It’s Christmas shopping, not rocket science.”

“Yeah, but it’s his first real Christmas,” Ray argued. “I just want this to be the best one that he’s ever had.”

“And it will be,” Victoria said. “You said over the phone that all of his other foster families never even tried to include him in their family traditions. Just by including him and showing him that you care will probably make this Christmas memorable.”

“You think?” Ray asked, looking back at the kids.

“Do you remember when Lorena gave Alex his Christmas stocking last month?”

Ray gave a small smile and nodded his head. How could he forget? Alex had been so heartbroken about being ostracized by his biological family for the holidays. He wasn't sure if he even wanted to celebrate Thanksgiving that year.

Lorena, Victoria's sister-in-law was not about to let that happen. Once she heard that Alex's family was intentionally ignoring him, she made it her mission to include him in every aspect of the holiday. She made sure that she made some of Alex's favorite holiday dishes. She invited him over the day before thanksgiving to have him help her bake all of the pies. She made sure that Alex was included in every family tradition.

Ray was pretty sure Alex was still upset about not seeing his family, but the moment that Lorena gave him a matching Molina family stocking, Alex started to cry. He told Ray that that was the moment he knew that the Molina's really wanted him. That he knew for sure that the Molina's weren't just going to throw him away at any moment. They knew all of Alex's flaws, they knew that he was gay, but the entire family welcomed him with open arms and showed that he was a part of their family.

"The holidays aren't about material possessions," Victoria said. "They're about being together and making memories. I think if you just show him you want to be in his life and you want to include him as part of this family, then that will be enough."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Ray said, taking a deep breath. He was calm for a few moments before the panic started to set in again. "I still haven't told the rest of the family about Reggie."

"I already took care of it," Victoria said, reassuring him. "My mom, Lorena, and Matt have everything covered for Christmas eve and Christmas Day. You just focus on making sure that Reggie feels safe and loved right now."

"That I can definitely do," Ray said, looking over at Reggie.

Reggie didn't know it, but he was about to meet a mountain of people who loved him.

"Oh my god, it's beautiful," Alex said, looking at the black and red vintage record player in the window of a mom-and-pop music store on Hollywood Boulevard.

Reggie had taken him and Luke there one afternoon when Caleb had gotten hungover and basically kicked all of the boys out of the house so he could have a full day of peace and quiet. Reggie claimed that he went to that store all of the time, but every time Luke and Alex were able to stop by, they were never able to catch Reggie.

“We’re shopping for Reggie,” Julie reminded him. “Besides, don’t you already have a record player. I’m pretty sure dad got you one for you for your Birthday last year.”

“Yeah, I know,” Alex said, walking into the store. “This would be for Reggie. He’s a massive music person. Don’t tell Luke this, but he may be more talented than him.”

“I highly doubt that,” Julie said, walking into the store.

Julie was quite impressed when she walked into the store. She usually tried to avoid going to any store near Hollywood Boulevard since the area was crowded and covered with tourists, but this store itself was pretty huge. Not only did they have a massive collection of vinyl records in just about every genre, but they also had a huge instrument section.

Alex smiled as he saw the banjo on the wall. The last time he was here with Reggie, he remembered how much the brunette gushed about how he learned how to play the banjo when he was little and how he was actually good at it. Luke didn’t believe him until the owner let Reggie play the instrument. Needless to say, the entire store was impressed.

“No, I’m serious,” Alex said, picking up the banjo from its stand. “Reggie is like an idiot savant, especially when it comes to music. He mastered the banjo when he was nine.”

Julie was having a hard time telling if Alex was serious or not. She did manage to overhear Reggie saying some questionable things.

“It’s hard to believe that the same person who just this morning called his toothpaste bone soap also mastered the banjo when he was nine,” Julie said.

“Bone soap?” Victoria asked, a tad bit confused.

“Yeah, he also tends to call coffee bean juice when he can’t think of the correct word,” Alex said. “But again, I did call him an idiot savant. Emphasis on the word idiot.”

“Be nice,” Victoria scolded.

“I still don’t think he mastered it by the time he was nine,” Julie said, shaking her head.

“Listen, all I’m saying is that Reggie had to have learned how to play it before he went into foster care,” Alex argued.

“Why do you say that?” Victoria asked.

“Apparently, he hasn’t had the best luck when it comes to foster parents,” Alex said disappointingly. “He told me and Luke that most of them didn’t really want to deal with him, let alone acknowledge any of his musical abilities.”

At this point, Victoria wasn’t even surprised. Ray had filled her in on as much of Reggie’s past as she could since she agreed to help him out with the kids whenever he needed, but the fact that Reggie’s apparent musical ability had gone unnoticed for several years was heartbreaking. Julie was extremely lucky since her mother was the one who gave her her love of music; Alex’s parents also agreed to let their son learn how to play the drums when he was 10, they probably also thought it was the manliest instrument to learn, but that’s beside the point, and at least Luke’s parents acknowledged his passion for music even if they didn’t agree with it. If Reggie actually had a proper music education, then he could probably have a shot at a career as a musician.

“Sounds like he would do well at Los Feliz,” Victoria suggested.

“Yeah, it’s a shame they don’t have any openings for the music program right now,” Alex said disappointingly.

“Yeah, what a shame,” Victoria said slyly. Principle Lessa owed her a favor, and she intended to cash that in as soon as possible.

“So should we get Reggie a banjo?” Julie asked, liking the one Alex picked out.

“I think we should ask your dad before we purchase another instrument, *mi carniña*,” Victoria said, taking a picture of the instrument to send to Ray. “In the meantime, why don’t we get him that record player in the window and a few vinyl records.”

“Oh, and let’s get him a kazoo for his stocking,” Julie suggested.

Alex almost butted in to object, but then he realized that Reggie would probably annoy Luke with the Kazoo more than him. That would be totally worth the possible headache.

“That’s a great idea,” Victoria said with a slight chuckle. “We can get some for the whole family! I’m sure your dad will love that.”

Julie and Alex both nodded their heads at Victoria’s suggestion before they started to search the store for vinyls of bands that Alex knew Reggie liked.

“What do you think about this one?” Luke asked, pulling the ninth flannel from the rack.

As soon as Julie and Alex met up with Tia Victoria, Luke insisted that the first thing he, Reggie, Ray, and Carlos needed to shop for was flannels. Reggie had a history of stealing his flannels in the past, not that he minded, Reggie needed new clothes at the time, and for some reason, Caleb was refusing to take him shopping. However, he was hoping that if Reggie could get a collection of his own, then maybe his flannels would be safe, and they wouldn’t go missing.

Reggie’s eyes widened at the black and white flannel that Luke had pulled. When he had a choice in wardrobe, he usually tended to lean towards darker colors, so this shirt was definitely in his color range.

At this rate, Ray was going to have to buy just about every flannel shirt in the store. Not that he minded, but he was hoping that Reggie would have a little more variety in his wardrobe. So far, the kid had only picked out a couple of pairs of black ripped jeans, two pairs of ripped dark wash jeans, a bunch of solid black, white, and grey shirts, a few graphic t-shirts, and now a plethora of flannel shirts.

This child had a very distinct style.

“I need this shirt in my life,” Reggie said, after feeling how soft the material was.

Reggie closed his eyes and gave a soft purr as he rubbed the material in between his fingers. For the first time since Ray had met Reggie, the boy seemed to relax.

Ray looked over at Luke to try and get a better grasp on what exactly was going through Reggie’s mind, but Luke just shrugged and said

that it was just a Reggie thing.

After Reggie put the flannel over his arm to try on, the foursome continued to scour the store, looking for more clothes that Reggie liked.

Carlos did eventually persuade Reggie to try on clothes that had a little more color, which, in Luke's opinion, is how Reggie found the tackiest color block sweatshirt imaginable.

"This is your style?" Luke asked, eyeing Reggie up and down. He had to admit the kid definitely had interesting taste in clothes.

"I like it," Carlos said enthusiastically.

"Dude, are you sure you want to be taking fashion advice from an eight-year-old?" Luke asked.

"I'm almost 12," Carlos retorted back. "Besides, I have more style than Mister. I'm allergic to sleeves over here!"

Luke and Carlos immediately started bickering, and Reggie couldn't even tell what they were saying since they started talking over each other.

Reggie immediately started to get overwhelmed. Luke and Carlos were having a full-on public argument, and it was all his fault.

This immediately brought him back to when he used to live with his parents full time. Their constant screaming in the middle of the night terrified Reggie and even alarmed a few neighbors to the point where the cops would have to be called. They would scream about who's fault it was that Reggie failed his spelling test or how one of them forgot to pick him up from school, but they would always get personal in the end. His dad would call his mom a drunk, or his mom would complain that his dad was always at work. Their fights were never-ending.

Reggie wasn't entirely sure if he would be able to cope right now if Luke and Carlos got too loud. Especially since he didn't fully trust Ray yet, he still hasn't figured the man out yet, and there were still too many uncertainties. He was too nice. Nobody was this nice.

Ray immediately noticed Reggie tense and knew he had to put a stop to this nonsense. Knowing these two, they could argue for hours. Luckily, whenever Luke was over, he was usually off with Alex or

Julie. Carlos always tended to stay clear. He, unfortunately, didn't get that luxury today. He also knew that if Carlos and Luke didn't stop arguing this instant, then Reggie might have a meltdown in the middle of the store.

That would not be good.

"Aww, come on, Reggie, are you seriously-" Luke started before getting cut off.

"Enough, you two," Ray said, exasperatingly. Carlos and Luke were getting on his last nerve, and he was honestly starting to regret his decision to bring either of the boys. But Carlos couldn't be trusted home alone at the moment after he almost burnt the house down trying to make soup (don't ask how), and he needed Luke here so Reggie could have an emotional support human. There was no winning in this situation. "If you guys could please get along for at least a couple more hours, then I will buy everyone a pretzel on our way out of here. Deal?"

Luke and Carlos immediately glanced at each other, and in a silent agreement, they both decided to put aside their style differences for a soft pretzel. They both knew it was worth it.

"Deal," they said in unison.

Ray immediately turned back to Reggie and noticed that the boy was starting to calm down. Note to self: Reggie does not like it when people argue.

"You okay, mijo?" Ray asked. "Do you maybe want to take a break and get a drink or something?"

Reggie slowly lifted his eyes to meet Ray's.

"I'm sorry," Reggie said quickly.

Ray's eyebrows immediately became furrowed. Why on earth was Reggie apologizing?

"I didn't mean to make them start fighting," Reggie pleaded. "I swear it was an accident."

"No, no, no mijo," Ray started. "This wasn't your fault."

"Yeah, no, we tend to argue like this all time. I swear." Luke said.

“Yeah, usually I tend to keep them separated, but since Julie is shopping for Carlos, I couldn’t leave him with Victoria.”

“Yeah, and I didn’t want to spend the entire day with Tia Victoria. She scares me,” Luke confessed.

Ray gave Luke a pointed look, and to be honest, he didn’t know if Luke being afraid of his sister-in-law was a good thing or a bad thing. He would have to assess that later. Right now, he needed to focus on Reggie and making sure that he was okay.

“Let’s take a break,” Ray suggested. “I’ll ask one of the shop assistants if they can put all of this on hold for a little bit while we go and get a smoothie or something.”

Reggie slowly nodded his head and looked at Luke, who was giving him a silent symbol to make sure he’s okay.

Luke slowly pulled Reggie in for a hug. He smiled as the pale boy embraced his hug. He missed moments like this. He missed being able to poke Reggie’s sides until he started to laugh uncontrollably. He missed all of the shenanigans Reggie would somehow drag him and Alex into every week. He missed the late-night cuddles that came out of sharing a twin-sized bed with him 3-4 times a week. He missed the ditsy, bouncy, and brave boy he knew nine months ago. Caleb somehow screwed with Reggie’s head, and it wasn’t fair, but Luke was now determined to get the old Reggie back. The one he and Alex fell in love with. The one that instantly became their brother.

Ray walked back to the group with a smile on his face.

“Okay, let’s go get a smoothie, and we can try again in a little bit,” Ray said, trying to keep his tone upbeat.

As the foursome walked to the food court, Reggie spotted a beautiful studded black leather jacket in the window of a vintage store. He had always wanted a leather jacket, whether it was real or fake, but all of his other foster parents deemed it to be a waste of money since it was always hot and sunny in LA, and he would probably grow out of it in a couple of years.

“Do you want to try it on?” Ray asked, noticing his admiration for the jacket.

“It’s fine,” Reggie quickly said.

The jacket was probably real, and there was no way Ray was going to waste his money and buy him an extremely expensive jacket that he could only wear for a couple more months. It was easier to just walk away from the store and forget about the jacket altogether. Besides, he didn't deserve nice things anyway.

Luke stayed behind and took a photo of the jacket and sent it to Julie. Reggie may not have said it, but he knew that he wanted that Jacket. Plus, it went perfectly with Reggie's emo flannel vibe.

As soon as he sent Julie the text, he received an incoming message from his mom. She wanted him to come home soon. Luke started to type out a long message about how he was busy and planning to spend the rest of the evening at the Molina's when he remembered what his mom said in family therapy yesterday.

I feel like things aren't getting better, and he's just avoiding us.

Luke sighed. This was a two-way street. If he wanted to continue working on his relationship with his parents, then he needed to show them that he was trying as well.

Luke quickly texted his mom back to let him know that he would head home as soon as they could connect with Alex again. He knew he could trust Ray to take care of Reggie, but Reggie still didn't feel very comfortable being alone for a long time with Ray yet.

Luke quickly ran to catch up with the rest of the group on their walk to get smoothies. He put his arm around Reggie and gave him a quick squeeze assuring Reggie that he was there for him. That he would always be there for him from now on.

Chapter End Notes

A new chapter is up! Plus I've already started working on the next chapter! Please let me know your n feedback, and if you have any suggestions for what you would like to see in the upcoming chapters, let me know! I do have a rough idea of how this story will progress, but I am willing to take suggestions for anything you would like to read!

Chapter 8: Oh Christmas Tree, Oh Christmas Tree

Chapter Summary

“What do you say, Alex?” Ray said, handing him the ax. “Do you want to take the first swing?”

Alex hesitated for a moment before he took the ax. He wasn’t sure if Ray was serious or not. I mean, who in their right mind lets a bunch of kids use an ax.

Chapter Notes

Content Warning for this chapter: Alex curses in this chapter, and there is some mention of the neglect that the boys endured under Caleb's care.

With that in mind, please grab some tissues and enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The holidays for the Patterson family used to be a time of joy and comfort. Luke's mother, Emily, would always start decorating the house the day after Thanksgiving while they watched *It's A Wonderful Life* and *Frosty The Snowman*. It was a tradition the family celebrated every year, that was until Luke ran away last Black Friday. The day Luke told his mother that he had been given a full scholarship to the Los Feliz High School for Performing Arts.

“I don’t understand why you won’t let me go?” Luke shouted. “It’s not like it’s going to cost you guys anything, plus the school is only 20 minutes away.”

“Glenn Oak’s music program is fine enough,” Emily argued. “Besides, you are barely passing your science and math classes right now! How on earth are you supposed to focus on your real classes at a school where you just play music all day?”

“Music is a real class,” Luke yelled. “And I’m bored at Glenn Oak. I am way ahead of any other music student at that school. It’s not challenging anymore!”

“You don’t need to be challenged. You just need to get good enough

grades so you can get into a good college.”

“And what if I don’t want to go to college?”

Luke’s mother went quiet. Both she and her husband were professors at USC; not going to college was never supposed to be an option for Luke.

“Jesus, Luke, what do you expect to do with your life if you don’t have a college degree?”

“I’ve told you, I want to be a musician,” Luke pressed.

“Okay, and what if you don’t make it in the industry?” Emily argued. “Do you know how hard it is to get signed to a record label these days? Do you know how many failed musicians there are in the world? At least if you have a college degree, then you can give yourself some options.”

“This isn’t the 90s, mom!” Luke yelled. “There are other ways to make it in the music industry. Bobby and I have plans to start a band, and we can start getting traction online. Plus, if I go to Los Feliz, I would have connections to other musicians and even Hollywood Agents. I could probably even find a drummer or a bass player for my band there! There will be so many opportunities for me there!”

“What happens when they find out you’re failing Algebra?” Emily clapped back. “Or even biology? At this rate, you may have to redo your entire Sophomore year Luke? Do you think they’re still going to want you then? You can’t even focus in school with the music schedule you have now. I guarantee you things will be 10 times harder at this new school.”

“Oh my god, mom! You’re impossible,” Luke said, frustratingly. “My grades aren’t even that bad. Just because I’m not a straight-A student like you and dad were in high school doesn’t mean I am going to have to retake my entire Sophomore year.”

“That’s it,” Emily said sternly. “We’re done with this conversation. You are not going to that school. End of discussion. Also, bring me your guitar.”

“Why?” Luke asked, a bit taken back.

“You’re taking a break from music,” Emily said, crossing her arms.

Luke was shocked. In the six years that he's had his guitar, his mother has never confiscated it. Music was his whole life. In fact, he wasn't entirely sure he could live without music.

"Your dad and I should have never gotten you that guitar," she said under her breath.

That was the moment Luke knew he couldn't stay in that house any longer. He wasn't entirely sure where he was going to go, but he knew that if his mom was going to hold him back from playing music, then he couldn't be anywhere near her.

Luke quickly ran towards his room, packed a duffle bag full of clothes, grabbed his guitar. He immediately ran past his mother to grab his jacket and phone and ran out the front door.

"Where do you think you're going?" Emily asked. "I did not say you could leave the house!"

Luke didn't even respond; he just got on his bike and rode off down the street, all of his stuff in tow, not even bothering to look back.

He ended up riding his bike all the way from Glendale to Bobby Wilson's house in Los Feliz, a place that he often frequented when he got into an argument with his parents.

Bobby's dad was pretty chill, considering he was a pediatric ER doctor and a trauma surgeon at one of the children's hospitals in Los Angeles. Bobby's mom, however, had moved back to Canada after their divorce. Bobby doesn't really talk about her that much, but he mentioned to Luke that he and his dad see her every Christmas and for a couple of weeks during the summer.

"My dad said it's okay for you to crash here for a bit," Bobby said, carrying a spare set of sheets for the pullout bed in the garage. "But, we're heading up to Toronto for the holidays on the 22nd, and while I would love for you to come with us, I think it would be illegal to smuggle you across the border without your parents' permission. So, unfortunately, you're going to have to either make up with your parents before Christmas or find a new place to stay."

"Thanks," Luke said sincerely. "But I'm not going back home. I'd rather sleep in a tent on the beach than go back there."

Bobby groaned. Unlike Luke, he wasn't very fond of emotions, and judging by how dramatic Luke was at the moment, he knew that he

was going to have to have a heart-to-heart conversation with him.

“Kill me now,” Bobby thought, sitting down on the pullout couch.

It took him a few moments of mental preparation before he was able to utter the dreaded words to Luke.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Bobby asked painfully.

“My mom said that she wished she’d never bought me my guitar,” Luke said, tears slowly falling down his face.

“Did you tell her about our plan?” Bobby asked. “You know, to start a band?”

“She thinks we’ll fail,” Luke said, wiping the tears from his eyes. “She thinks I’m a failure.”

“Luke,” Bobby started. “You’re not a failure.”

“Are you sure?” Luke asked. “Both of my parents have their doctorates and are professors at USC. While I’m over here making a C in just about every subject except music. I’m never going to be good enough for them.”

“Then show them,” Bobby told him. “Show them how talented you actually are because that student showcase at Glenoak didn’t even do you justice. Yet, Principal Lessa and Mrs. Harrison still saw your potential and gave you a scholarship.”

“How?” Luke asked. “My parents didn’t even bother to come to my student showcase. They canceled their three-hour night class last month to go to some lecture in San Diego, but they won’t even cancel class to go to their only son’s concert.”

Bobby didn’t know what to say. His parents were definitely being dicks right now. All he knew he could do was comfort his friend and be there for him, and hope that by the time he left for Toronto that Luke would be safe at home.

But unfortunately, that didn’t happen. Luke slept on the beach for two days before he got picked up by the cops and put in the care of Caleb Covington while social services tried to mend Luke’s relationship with his parents.

Emily was hoping that things would get back to normal after Luke

agreed to come home in March, but only after they agreed to let him attend Los Feliz in the fall. Reluctantly, his parents said yes, as long as Luke promised to try and get his grades up. However, their relationship was still pretty strained, and instead of spending most of his time at home with them, he was spending all of his spare time at the Molina residence.

“I’m back,” Luke yelled, walking in the door.

Luke was greeted by the smell of his mother's homemade chicken pot pie and soft jazz music playing on the speakers. His dad was reading the New York Times on his iPad while his mom was finishing up dinner. He quickly took his shoes off and put his keys on the key rack by the door. Emily smiled and wiped her hands on a dishtowel, and walked into the living to greet her son.

“Perfect, dinner should be done in 20 minutes. How was the sleepover?” Emily asked, hugging her son. “Please tell me you and Alex didn’t stay up all night practicing again?”

Luke took a deep breath. He never actually told his mother why he wanted to sleep over at the Molina’s last night. He just sent her a rapid text letting her know that he would be back the next day and that he had a spare set of everything in Alex’s room.

He didn’t tell her that Caleb got caught or even anything about the man. All he said was that the group home wasn’t a good place to live and that he wanted to come home, even if that wasn’t really true.

“We actually didn’t play at all last night,” Luke said, sitting down on the couch so that his father could be included in this conversation. His dad put down his iPad and focused his attention on Luke.

“Well, that’s a first,” Emily said, taking a seat next to Luke. “Usually, you come home exhausted after rehearsing all night.”

“Yeah, well, we had a pretty emotional night,” Luke started. This immediately got the attention of both of his parents. “The Molina’s took in a new foster placement yesterday, and he used to live at the Covington Home for Boys.”

“Oh,” Emily said. She was surprised that Luke brought up the group home. He always tried to stay away from any topics regarding it, even when it included Alex.

“He was mine and Alex’s roommate,” Luke confessed.

Emily and Mitch looked at each other in shock. Luke never mentioned a second roommate before. He only ever talked about Alex.

Luke wasn't sure if he wanted to go into more detail about his and Alex's relationship with Reggie. He knew his parents. Ever since he came home, his mom was constantly worrying about him. Granted, she had every right to be, especially with how bad he looked when he came home last March. If they found out what happened at the group home, they would never let him out of their sight again.

"You never mentioned another roommate," his dad said.

"Yeah, we kind of lost touch when I had to move back home," Luke said. Technically it wasn't a lie. They did lose touch.

"Well, we'd love to meet him," Emily said, giving Luke a comforting smile. "Maybe we could do dinner with the Molina's sometime after the holidays?"

"Yeah, I think that can happen," Luke said, giving a small smile.

Alex was right. The Christmas tree farm that Molina's usually got their tree from was all out of Christmas trees. However, what Ray neglected to tell him was that he had already purchased a tree three weeks in advance; they just were just there to chop it down.

Growing up in the midwest, Ray used to chop down his own Christmas tree every year with his parents. They used it as a therapeutic tool to get rid of any residual anger left over from the previous year so that the next few weeks could be spent making happy memories and creating resolutions that would hopefully start the new year off on a new foot.

When he moved to Los Angeles to pursue a career in photography, he decided that this would be one of the traditions that he would share with his family. Julie and Carlos were, of course, not allowed to hold an ax until they were eight, but he and victoria still made an entire evening out of it. They would chop down the tree, grab takeout somewhere, and spend the entire evening getting the house decorated for Christmas. Now, this was a tradition he couldn't wait to share with his new kids.

"So," Ray said, pulling an ax out of Tia Victoria's trunk. "Who wants to be the first one to take a whack?"

He looked out amongst all of his kids and tried to decipher who needed to take their anger out the most. At the moment, Julie and Carlos were doing fine. Yes, they were still grieving their mom, but that was to be expected, but aside from that, they actually had a really good year. Julie graduated from grief counseling, and Carlos found a new hobby that may or may not be related to the death of his wife. He wasn't entirely sure on that one. Reggie and Alex, on the other hand, did not have the best year.

Ray debated on whether or not he should give the ax to Reggie. The kid definitely had the worst year out of the entire family, but judging on what happened at the mall today, he started to wonder if whacking at a tree for several minutes would actually help alleviate some of his stress.

Alex, on the other hand, was a completely different story. He literally played the drums so he could get rid of his anxious energy. The moment Alex's therapist suggested he sign him up for drum lessons, Ray knew that there was never going to be another quiet moment in his house again. But he didn't care. He just wanted Alex to feel calm and happy for once, and to be honest; he was about to have a visit with his brother, so he desperately needed to let out some anxious energy.

Ray looked at Julie and Carlos for their opinion, and they both silently agreed that Alex needed the first whack the most.

"What do you say, Alex?" Ray said, handing him the ax. "Do you want to take the first swing?"

Alex hesitated for a moment before he took the ax. He wasn't sure if Ray was serious or not. I mean, who in their right mind lets a bunch of kids use an ax.

"Is this allowed?" Alex asked. He didn't want Ray to get in trouble at all.

"I mean legally, yes," Ray said, giving a small chuckle. "But I also checked with both of your social workers, and they said that it was fine."

"Okay," Alex said, taking a deep breath. Was he really about to chop down a tree? I mean, I'm sure his father would approve since it's considered a manly activity.

"Now," Ray said, getting Alex into a proper position. "I want you to

focus all of your negative and anxious energy on the tree, and when you're ready, you need to hit it as hard as you can. Do you understand?"

"Yeah," Alex said, giving a slight smile.

This year has been the worst. Not only had his parents accidentally found out he was gay, but they kicked him out of their lives. Everyone who he thought he was friends with turned out to be homophobic jerks, which shouldn't have been a surprise since he went to an all-boys catholic school, but it still hurt. None of his family has made any effort to contact him, and he hasn't been able to have contact with his brothers. He spent three months in a group home being abused by Caleb Covington. And to top it all off, he had to leave Reggie behind.

Alex squared up his hands on the ax, leaving room for both hands to comfortably grip the weapon. He stared down at the stem of the tree and took a nice deep breath.

"AHHHHH!" Alex screamed as he swung the ax. That was for his parents.

He took the ax out of the tree and looked to Ray, hoping he was allowed to swing again. Ray gave Alex an affirming nod, and the boy started to get back in position.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" he screamed again. This time the scream was louder. That was for not being allowed to see his brothers.

Alex took one last deep breath and got back into position for his last turn. This last swing was dedicated to the man that made him sick to his stomach the entire year. The man who made Alex believe that it was his fault his family didn't want him anymore.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Alex screamed once more. "FUCK YOU!"

That was for Caleb Covington.

Alex quickly dropped the ax the moment he realized that he just cursed in front of Carlos. Ray had never outright said that he wasn't allowed to curse in front of him, but he made it very clear that he disapproved of the 11-year-old using inappropriate language.

"I am so sorry," Alex said, looking at Ray. "I don't, I don't know what came over me?"

“It’s fine,” Ray said, giving a slight chuckle.

“Yeah, It’s nothing I haven’t heard before,” Carlos said with a slight smile.

Victoria gave Carlos a slightly confused look. Where on earth had he heard that kind of language?

“Who’s cursed in front of my baby?” Victoria said. “Was it Luke? I told that boy-?”

“-Luke barely even acknowledges my existence,” Carlos said. While normally he did like to pin things on the older boy, it wasn’t any fun when he wasn’t here to defend himself. “I go to public school, remember?”

“Yeah, he’s got a point,” Julie said, remembering her time at Los Feliz Middle. “Middle schoolers are vicious creatures.”

“Just don’t make a habit of it, please,” Ray said, reassuring the sixteen-year-old that it was fine that he cursed.

“Yeah, I’ll try not to,” he said, giving his foster father a small smile.

Ray picked up the ax, knowing that he was going to have to talk to Alex about his outburst. But that could wait until later; they still had to finish chopping down the tree.

“Okay,” Ray said, looking at the rest of his kids. “Who’s next?”

When the Molina family got back home, Ray convinced Alex to help him bring the tree inside the house. Julie, Victoria, and Carlos immediately ran to the attic to grab all of the holiday decorations. That just left Reggie alone in the house like a sitting duck.

This wasn’t the first time Reggie was with a foster family while they decorated for the holidays, but it was the first time he was sure he would be included, and to be honest, he didn’t know how he could help. Most families usually had a set way of how they decorated their house for the holidays; Reggie didn’t want to mess that up in any way.

The living room looked like a complete disaster when Ray and Alex were finally able to place the Christmas tree in the corner of the living

room. At the same time, Julie, Carlos, and Victoria started unpacking all of the decorations.

“Okay,” Ray said, pulling out his phone. “What kind of pizza do you guys want?”

“Get me the Kevin McCallister special,” Carlos said, pulling out a string of tangled Christmas lights that he quickly handed them over to Tia Victoria to untangle.

“So, a large cheese pizza?” Julie asked with a slight chuckle.

“A large cheese pizza all to myself,” he said with a grin.

“You can have a small all to yourself. How about that?” Ray suggested, knowing the 11-year-old could barely finish a small on his own.

“Fine,” he said with a small huff.

“You’re such a dork,” Julie said, playfully pushing her brother. “Just get me a vegetarian, please.”

“Alex, you want meat lovers, right?” Ray asked, remembering the boy’s regular pizza order. He was always amazed at how he could eat an entire large pizza all by himself and not go into a food coma.

“Yeah,” he said, going through one of the boxes.

“Reggie, what about you?” Ray asked the quiet brunette sitting in the corner of the room.

“Oh, pizza is really expensive. So, I can just share with Alex; it’s fine,” Reggie said, pulling his knees to his chest. They just spent a ton of money buying him new clothes and some room decorations. He didn’t want to be greedy and get a pizza all to himself, even though he was starving.

“Yeah, that’s not going to be a good idea,” Carlos said, giving Alex a playful smirk. “Not unless you want your arm eaten as well.”

Reggie gave Alex a confused look. He, Luke, and Alex used to share a large pizza all the time when they were living at the group home. They used to busk at the beach or do odd jobs for people and try and scrounge six dollars together for a pizza at Little Caesars. Sure, they were usually all still hungry afterward, but now that Luke wasn’t

there, they could each get half.

Alex knew he needed to be the one to reassure Reggie that it was okay to get his own pizza. He would prefer it didn't happen in front of Julie and Carlos, but they would eventually find out some of what happened at the group home.

"Look, Reg," Alex said, sitting beside the brunette. "I know Caleb used to restrict how much we were allowed to eat."

"Yeah," Reggie said, nodding his head. "It's really expensive to feed like 30 teenage boys."

"That's true," Alex said, patting his knee. "But while we all went hungry, Caleb didn't. Remember the time Caleb made us all live off ramen noodles and cereal for like two weeks?"

"Yeah," Reggie said, looking down at his knees. How could he forget? He dashed out of his fourth-period Algebra class so he could devour his free lunch at school since his stomach wouldn't stop growling. He loved math, but during that time, he couldn't focus on anything at all. But that also wasn't the only time Caleb did that; it happened a couple of times before Luke and Alex got there and several times after they left.

"During that time, Caleb got drunk off his ass," Alex winced when he realized he cursed again, "But he was also eating eggs and bacon in front of all of us."

"Wait, are you serious?" Ray asked. This was the first time he was even told that the boys weren't being fed enough while they were at the group home.

"Yeah, but we ended up being fine," Alex assured him. "Luke got a hold of Bobby, and he bought us all like a ton of non-perishable meals that we snuck in for everyone."

"Cold beefaroni never tasted so good," Reggie said with a small smile.

Julie looked at her dad with worry in her eyes. Alex and Luke never mentioned any of this to her. And then it hit her. Last month, Los Feliz did a canned food drive to help give Thanksgiving meals to those in need. Luke and Alex both went crazy buying enough canned food for the drive. Alex did extra chores for a month and spent all that money on non-perishables. Julie just suspected it was because the fourth-period class that brought in the most canned goods got a free pizza

party during lunch, but now she realized that they both knew what it was like to go hungry, and they didn't want anyone else to experience that ever again.

"Look, mijó, a single pizza isn't going to break the bank," Ray said, understanding where Alex was going. "We have plenty of food in this house, and there's even a snack basket in the kitchen where you-"

"I know what a snack basket is," Reggie smiled. "A few of my other foster placements had them."

Reggie looked down at his shoelaces for a beat, unsure if he should tell them that it had just been a while since he's been somewhere safe.

"Okay then," Ray said, getting back to the topic at hand. "So, what kind of pizza do you want?"

"I'll just take a medium pepperoni, please," Reggie said.

Ray smiled. This was the first time that Reggie has told him something that he wants. This was big.

Ray quickly placed the delivery order, already knowing his sister-in-law's order by heart. Now, it was time to start decorating the house.

Ray went into one of the boxes and started to untangle a set of lights while Carlos pulled Reggie down from the couch to have him help go through the abundance of Christmas nick-nacks.

Julie wanted to help her family decorate for her mom's favorite holiday, but at the same time, she couldn't get the idea of Reggie, Luke, and Alex living off of Ramen for two weeks out of her mind. She knew there was more to what happened in that group home.

Julie got up from the floor and went into the kitchen, where she had made a surprise for Alex. She stared down at the homemade *Baby's First Christmas* ornament that she and Carlos, well, mostly her, made last week for Alex with one of the photos her dad took of him. They were planning on giving it to him tonight, but it didn't feel right not to have one for Reggie as well.

"Hey, mija," Ray said, kissing her on the top of her head. "What's up?"

"This doesn't feel right," Julie said, showing her dad the ornament. "I mean, I still want to give this to Alex, but it just doesn't feel right not

having one for Reggie as well.”

“Well, we still have a few days until Christmas,” Ray said. “Why don’t you make one for Reggie. We’re making gingerbread on Thursday, so I can probably snap a couple of photos during that, and we can give them to Reggie and Alex on Christmas Eve.”

“Yeah, I’ll start working it later tonight,” Julie said, giving her dad a smile.

Ray gave her a big hug. He loved how thoughtful his daughter was.

“Do you want to talk about what Alex said back there?” Ray asked, knowing Alex was trying his best to keep this sort of stuff away from Julie and Carlos. He assured him that they would be able to handle it, but Alex refused to talk about anything with Julie since he got there.

“I do,” Julie said, looking back at the boys in the living room. Carlos was currently talking off Reggie’s ear, but the older boy didn’t seem to mind. In fact, he seemed like he was actually enjoying it. “But I think it can wait until later. We have a ton of decorating to do, and tomorrow you get to spend the entire day putting up Christmas lights.”

“Yeah, I think I’m going to skip that tradition this year,” Ray said, hoping to get out of his biggest chore.

“No, you’re not,” Julie said, patting her dad on the shoulder. “You say you’re going to skip it every year, but you always end up doing it anyway.”

Ray huffed. She was right, and at this point, there was no point in denying it. At least now, he could probably get Alex to help him, and it would only take him half the time.

“Come on,” Ray said, guiding his daughter back in the living room. “I think there are some tangled lights with your name on them.”

Julie groaned as she started walking back into the living room. Untangling Christmas lights was a pain in the ass, but honestly, she loved that she doesn’t have to do it alone. Her entire family is pitching in, slowly doing her part, and once the lights were untangled, then the real fun of decorating could begin.

Chapter End Notes

Another chapter is finished. I feel like that very last scene with Alex and Reggie was almost impossible to write, but I wanted to give you guys an idea of what it was like at the group home with Caleb.

Let me know your thoughts, and I cannot wait to start working on the next chapter!

Chapter 9: The Calm Before the Storm

Chapter Summary

Reggie couldn't believe it. Ray bought Alex an iPad. That was an expensive gift, and on top of that, he noticed that the older boy also had a phone and a laptop. He'd never even been given a cell phone. He was supposed to get one from his social worker when he turned 13, but Caleb had a no electronics rule at the group home, which included Luke's crummy Nintendo ds that Caleb confiscated.

Chapter Notes

Content Warning Mentions of some of Caleb's past abuse is featured in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Sunday mornings in the Molina household were usually pretty relaxed. Typically Ray and the kids would sleep in until 9:30 or 10:00 and then get Sunday brunch together as a family before the kids finished up whatever schoolwork needed to get done before Monday. When Tia Victoria stays over, on the other hand, that's when things start to get a little hectic. They still do Sunday brunch, but now he, Julie, and Carlos have to get up an hour earlier to get ready for church.

Alex was always invited, but he never accepted the invitation. Ray believes that religion is a personal choice, and given Alex's background with his very conservative and religious parents, he understood why the 16-year-old refuses to step foot in a church. He even made sure that his sister-in-law didn't pressure Alex to go to church with them in any way.

The Sunday before Christmas was, of course, no exception. Victoria was combing Carlos's hair and making sure that he looked presentable while Julie finished putting on her makeup. Ray wasn't sure if Reggie would want to join them at church, but he wanted to make sure that he knew he was being included.

Ray was expecting to find a half-asleep teenager when he knocked on Reggie's door, but to his surprise, Reggie was awake and already dressed in black jeans and a white short-sleeved button-down shirt

with some black space cartoons, one of the nicer outfits they had just purchased.

“Wow,” Ray said. “I wasn’t expecting you to be awake yet.”

“Oh, yeah,” Reggie said, blushing a tad bit. “I noticed that you guys had a few crosses put up all over your house, so I just assumed that you guys go to church on Sundays.”

“We usually only go when Victoria sleeps over and on the holidays,” Ray said, smiling. “But we go to brunch every Sunday regardless.”

“Cool,” Reggie said, looking in the mirror to do his hair.

Alex soon walked down the hall dressed in full running gear. He stopped when he noticed that Ray was in Reggie’s room.

“I’m going for a quick run,” Alex said, putting his AirPods in. “I should be back in about 30 minutes.”

“Okay,” Ray said. “I’ll text you when we are leaving the church, and we will pick you up on our way to brunch.”

“You know, if I had my driver’s license, then I could actually drive myself to brunch,” Alex said, with a sly grin.

“I’ll talk to Drew about it tomorrow,” Ray said.

Ray knew that Alex was responsible enough to get his driver’s license. He had driven with him plenty of times to see that he was 100% focused on the road and did everything in his power to not get in a wreck. For once, his anxiety comes in handy. But Ray wanted to wait until he knew more about the permanency of Alex’s case before he let the teen get his driver’s license.

“Thanks, Ray,” Alex said with a smile.

“Wait,” Reggie said, slightly confused. “You’re not going to church with us?”

“No,” Alex said, shaking his head. “We don’t have to go to church if we don’t want to.”

“Oh,” Reggie said, a bit taken back.

This was new for Reggie. Usually, if his foster parents were religious, then he had to go to church with them; otherwise, they would send

him back. He always went with them since the music was peaceful, mainly because he didn't want to get sent away so fast. He never found a spiritual connection there. But he was also never given a choice on whether or not he would attend the services.

"Yeah," Ray said, giving a small smile. "I came in here to invite you to go with us, but you don't have to go if you don't want to. Alex never goes with us."

"Yup, just one of the perks of having religious trauma," Alex said with an awkward laugh.

"Please don't joke about that," Ray said, rolling his eyes.

Reggie didn't necessarily like going to church, but so far, he liked Ray, and he liked being a part of this family. He wanted to do everything in his power to get the Molina's to keep him, even if that meant having to go to church with them. Besides, it couldn't be as bad as he remembered.

"Yeah, I'd like to go if that's alright," Reggie said with a slight smile.

"That's perfectly fine. We're leaving in ten minutes," Ray said, patting Reggie's shoulder.

"Really?" Alex asked, slightly confused and a little judgy. That's when it clicked in his head. He knew exactly what Reggie was doing. He was going to intervene, but at this point, he figured it would just be best to let Reggie be. "Okay..."

"I will pick you up for brunch when we get out," Ray said to Alex before he quickly made his way out of the room and downstairs to wait for everyone else to finish getting ready for church. Alex waited a bit longer before he went out on his run.

"I don't know if Carlos has mentioned this yet, but tonight we're having a brothers-only movie night," Alex said.

"Cool," Reggie said, trying to sound okay that he wasn't included. He just got there; he totally understands if Carlos didn't want to include him tonight.

"Yeah, basically, we'll be watching Christmas movies on the pullout couch in the studio all night," Alex said. "It starts at 6:30, so wear your most comfortable pj's."

“Oh, okay,” Reggie said, a bit shocked. Did Carlos really consider him his brother?

“Okay,” Alex said, trying to remove some awkward tension. “I’m going to go on my run now. Actually, hold on.”

Alex quickly ran over to his bedroom to grab something he figured might help Reggie adjust better over the next couple of weeks. He’s still a teenager, and at some point, he’s going to want to shut everyone out for a few hours.

“You have an iPad?” Reggie asked, a bit shocked when Alex walked in holding the device.

“Yeah, Ray got it for me over the summer,” Alex said with a shrug. “I mainly use it for school so I can take notes for all of my classes, but I also downloaded Netflix and Hulu.”

Reggie couldn’t believe it. Ray bought Alex an iPad. That was an expensive gift, and on top of that, he noticed that the older boy also had a phone and a laptop. He’d never even been given a cell phone. He was supposed to get one from his social worker when he turned 13, but Caleb had a no electronics rule at the group home, including Luke’s crummy Nintendo ds that Caleb confiscated.

“Here,” Alex said, handing Reggie the iPad and an apple pencil. “This is just until Ray gets you something of your own. Feel free to do whatever; just don’t post on any of my socials. I will know, and I will not be happy.”

“Just for that, I’m going to post the ugliest picture to your Instagram,” Reggie said with a smile.

“Jokes on you,” Alex said, heading downstairs. “Instagram doesn’t have an iPad app. I’ll see you after church, weirdo.”

Alex quickly headed down the stairs. Not expecting to run into anyone else, he opened up Spotify and started his running playlist. He was about to put his earbuds in for hopefully the final time when he got stopped by Ray.

“Hey, do you want to talk about what happened yesterday?” Ray said, sipping on a cup of coffee.

The two were currently the only ones downstairs; everyone else was upstairs, still getting ready. To be frank, though, Alex didn’t really

know what part of yesterday Ray wanted to talk about. Was it his sudden outburst while he was hitting a tree, or was it the fact that he just confessed to being withheld food by his and Reggie's former caregiver? Neither of which he really wanted to discuss.

He didn't want to talk about Caleb, not today. He was actually in a really decent mood, he wasn't feeling too anxious at the moment, and he just got reunited with Reggie. Plus, he just wanted to focus on his movie night with Carlos and Reggie and his upcoming visitation with Danny. There was no way in hell Caleb was going to ruin his good mood.

"I'd rather not," Alex said, taking a deep breath.

"Okay, well, would you like me to schedule an appointment with Dr. Connors after the break?" Ray asked.

Dr. Connors is Alex's therapist specializing in LGBT issues, trauma, depression, and anxiety. While Alex was very reluctant to start going to therapy, it ended up helping him to stop blaming himself for his parents' actions. His visits with Dr. Connors are no longer a twice-a-week activity, but he still goes at least once a month.

"Sure," Alex said, giving Ray a small smile. "Can I go now? I want to try and get 4 miles in today."

"Somebody's being very ambitious this morning," Ray said, shaking his head. He knew that running was probably a way for Alex to shake off some of his nerves, but he didn't want to push." Go ahead."

Alex smiled and finally put in his AirPods. He quickly grabbed a water bottle and headed out the door, leaving Ray alone in the kitchen.

"Carlos should be ready in a few minutes," Tia Victoria said, walking down the stairs in a beautiful sundress and heels. Usually, she would wear something more form-fitting to show off her figure, but she knew better than to dress like that in the house of God, even if she did want to try and impress the cute, single Deacon.

"Okay, and Reggie wants to come with us," Ray said. "So as soon as everyone else is ready, then we can head out. Maybe we can try and get a pew upfront."

"Those pews are reserved for people who aren't holiday Catholics," Victoria said playfully.

Ray rolled his eyes. His sister-in-law was right. He, Julie, and Carlos were definitely becoming holiday Catholics, but after spending a year in the hospital with Rose, sitting in church for an hour didn't feel the same.

"So, I talked to Miranda Lessa yesterday," Victoria said.

Ray's ears perked up. Was something wrong? He knew she was on the email list for Julie and Alex at Los Feliz, but he could have sworn they didn't do anything worthy of getting her attention.

"A student is withdrawing from the music program next semester, and they have an opening," she said, biting her lip. She was praying she wasn't about to overstep her boundaries. "Usually, they have a pretty long waitlist, but I explained Reggie's situation, and I was able to get him an audition. I also may have mentioned that he's a possible musical prodigy."

"What makes you think that?" Ray asked. Reggie mentioned that he used to play a bit, but there was no way he could have had the consistent training needed to get into Los Feliz.

"Alex mentioned that he practically mastered the banjo when he was like nine," Victoria said. "He said he may even be more talented than Luke."

"Really?" Ray asked, raising his eyebrows again.

How on earth does a small child have access to an instrument like a banjo? To be honest, he didn't know much of Reggie's past or why he entered foster care. His social worker was swamped on Friday, which is why he had made another appointment to meet with her on Monday. He had a feeling there was more to Reggie than most people saw.

He also was completely open to the idea of Reggie transferring to The Los Feliz High School for Performing Arts, his current school in North Hollywood was about 25 minutes away, not including LA traffic. It would be so much easier if he could transfer to Los Feliz. Even if he didn't get into the music program, he could still be enrolled in their regular classes. That's what Alex did when he came to live with them in March.

"I'll discuss it with Reggie and his social worker tomorrow," Ray said. "When's his audition?"

"January 2nd," Victoria said with a smile. "So he needs to start

preparing now.”

Ray took a deep breath. He wasn’t even sure if music was even something that Reggie wanted to pursue. Then again, the way his eyes lit up when he walked into the music studio for the first time reminded him a bit of Rose. If his instincts were right, then he would jump at this chance.

The rest of their Sunday was pretty quiet. Reggie noticed that the Molina’s didn’t really parade him around at church like his previous foster parents had. A couple of families did ask about him after church, but Ray just introduced Reggie to the other families and didn’t mention that he was a foster child.

After brunch, everyone kind of decided to take a couple of hours to themselves, so Reggie took that time to make his new bed with the brand new sheets that Ray had purchased for him. Ray wanted to buy a few more decorations while they were at the mall, but Luke needed to head home, and he could tell that Reggie was a bit tired after his almost meltdown.

While not completely finished, Reggie’s room now had red flannel sheets with a matching pillow set and a gray bedspread. The walls were still empty, aside from the mirror hanging above his dresser, and there weren’t any knickknacks cluttered around the space. Reggie didn’t care, though. If this placement went like all of his other foster placements, then he would be moved on to the next house by the start of the next school year, so it was best that he didn’t collect any unnecessary clutter.

Once he was done, he picked up the iPad that Alex let him use, and he opened up Procreate. Reggie had taken an art elective at his old school and fell in love with art and digital design. Drawing was an easy hobby to pick up since Caleb didn’t allow any electronics. All he needed was a pencil and paper, and he could get lost in the world of his imagination.

Luckily, his art teacher, Mr. Richards, let him stay after school a couple of days a week while teaching an after-school art class for middle schoolers. He tried to help him out with the other students, but he would never let him. His music teacher, Ms. Myres, did the same. She would stay after two days a week as Reggie just plucked on the bass guitar or the piano in the music room. Deep down, though, he

knew that they both had an inkling as to what was going on at the group home, especially when he would wolf down the after-school snack they always brought him.

"Whatcha doodling?" Alex asked when he knocked on Reggie's door.

"Oh, nothing really," Reggie said, closing Alex's iPad. That was a lie. He knew exactly what he was drawing. Alex just didn't need to see it. He planned to email it to himself once he was done and then immediately delete it off the device.

"I just wanted to check in and see how you're doing," Alex said, taking a seat on Reggie's bed. "You didn't really tell Luke or me what happened at Caleb's."

Reggie immediately looked down at his hands and began to pick at his nails. Luke and Alex really didn't experience half of Caleb's wrath because, as Reggie realized a few months into his placement, the longer you stay, the scarier he becomes.

"I broke a plate," Reggie said, still not looking Alex in the eyes.

"Oh," Alex said with a sad sigh.

Alex knew that couldn't be the whole story. He had done the same thing during his first month at Caleb's, and he just remembered Caleb yelling at him for ten minutes and then making him clean up every single piece of glass with his bare hands. Luckily there weren't a lot of tiny shards of glass, but his hands were still pretty scratched up afterward.

Breaking a plate in the Covington Home for Boys was bad, but Caleb never gave anyone a black eye over a busted plate, plus Reggie's hands were perfectly fine. Alex didn't want to push him through. Whatever really happened must have been bad enough for the entire home to get shut down.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Alex asked, wondering the best way to approach the situation.

Reggie just timidly shook his head. He wasn't sure if he would ever be ready to talk about what happened at Caleb's, but he knew that he definitely couldn't talk about it right now.

"Okay, well, how about we head down to the studio to set up for movie night then?" Alex asked, hoping to bring the younger boy back out of his shell. "I need help setting up the projector, and Carlos isn't allowed to touch it."

Reggie gave a small smile as he got up off his bed. If Alex actually needed his help with something electric, this projector must be pretty complicated to set up.

“Okay, scratch that,” Alex said, taking an exasperated sigh on the couch. “Neither you nor Carlos are allowed to touch the Projector.”

“But it wasn’t even my fault,” Reggie said with pleading eyes.

“I don’t care,” Alex said, glaring at Reggie. “You still somehow almost managed to electrocute the both of us! I mean, why on earth would you think it would be okay to just press random buttons while I’m trying to get everything plugged in?”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time?” Reggie said innocently.

“You’re lucky you’re cute,” Alex said, shaking his head.

The two sat there in silence for a few minutes as Alex started to scroll through the various holiday films on Disney + and Netflix. Currently, he was feeling a classic movie, but none of those were available on streaming.

“I’m going to murder Luke,” Julie said, walking into the studio. She immediately took a dramatic seat next to Alex.

“Will you need help hiding the body?” Alex asked.

“You’ll probably want to be an accomplice,” Julie said with snark.

“Oh, what did lover boy do now?”

“So I just got off the phone with Nick and-” Julie said before getting cut off.

“Why were you talking with Nick?” Alex asked, trying to get some tea.

“He and Carrie had another fight,” Julie said, rolling her eyes. This was the fifth time this semester they had had a huge fight and almost broken up.

“And he didn’t come to me? I’m a little hurt,” Alex said in a fake upset tone.

“He said you would probably take Carrie’s side about it,” Julie said,

rolling her eyes.

“Anyway, he told me that Newsies isn’t the spring show. It’s the spring charity show,” Julie said, a little pissed.

“That idiot,” Alex said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“What’s the Spring Charity Show?” Reggie asked, a bit confused.

“So, every year, the school does two different shows in the Spring. Both of them are open to all the students to audition, but the Spring Charity Show is like ten times harder to get into,” Julie said with a slight smile.

“Yeah, it’s a very limited cast, and it’s basically like doing a professional show. The students who get cast get to work with actual industry professionals,” Alex said, sitting up in his seat. “Last year, they did The Little Mermaid and raised like \$100,000 for Oceana. Oh my god, that’s why Nick’s dad is choreographing.”

“Wow,” Reggie said, taken back a bit. The students at that school must be crazy talented to raise that much money for charity just by doing one show. Even if his social worker does let him transfer to their school, there is no way he’s even talented enough to get cast in one of those shows.

“Did Nick mention what charity they’re doing this year?” Alex asked.

“No, apparently they’re announcing it when we get back from break,” Julie said. “Do you still want to audition?”

“I would kill to be able to be in something choreographed by Ryan Danforth-Evans. I say we give it a shot,” Alex said with a smile. “After we murder Luke.”

“Awesome,” Julie said with a smile. “Flynn told me she wants us to do a musical theater boot camp after New Year to start prepping for the auditions. So beware.”

“I think I can handle Flynn,” Alex said, rolling his eyes.

A few moments later, Carlos came running into the studio with his pajamas on and a huge ghost plush he received from Alex on his birthday in October. He immediately plopped himself on the couch and covered himself with one of the many blankets that were just sitting around.

“You can’t be in here,” Carlos told Julie. “Brothers only!”

“That’s not fair,” Julie joked. In reality, she was totally fine being left out of this movie night. Instead, she had a giant craft bucket in her bedroom where she would start on Reggie’s Christmas ornament.

“Sorry, I didn’t make the rules,” Carlos shrugged. “Alex did.”

“My bad,” he said dryly.

“Have fun,” Julie said, messing her little brother’s hair up and heading out of the studio.

“Okay, so we’re watching the entire Home Alone 1&2, right?” Carlos asked seriously as soon as Julie left the room.

“Yeah, sure, buddy, whatever you want,” Alex said, rolling his eyes.

Alex started the movie, and the three boys cuddled next to each other on the couch. They were all sound asleep and peacefully quiet halfway through the second movie.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, so I promise this fic is not abandoned I just got busy. I started long-term subbing for schools and I worked on a kids film this fall and I literally had no time to write or breathe. Updates are for sure coming I promise!

P.S. what do you think this year's charity is going to be? Leave your guesses in the comments and you will find out in the later chapters.

Chapter 10: Social Workers & Visitations

Chapter Summary

Alex's parents weren't supposed to find out he was gay until after he graduated from college. He planned to stay in the closet until he was officially out of the house and then he could be himself. His parents would still be a part of his life, but they wouldn't have to know he was gay. That didn't happen though. Instead, he was outed at a church Halloween party and was promptly kicked out by his parents before the clock struck 12 on New Year's Eve.

He never told anyone what went on inside his house during those two months. His brothers knew though. His brothers witnessed everything.

Chapter Notes

Surprise!!!!!! I'm back! With a long ass chapter that was super hard to write!

Alex's parents weren't supposed to find out he was gay until after he graduated from college. He planned to stay in the closet until he was officially out of the house and then he could be himself. His parents would still be a part of his life, but they wouldn't have to know he was gay. That didn't happen though. Instead, he was outed at a church Halloween party and was promptly kicked out by his parents before the clock struck 12 on New Year's Eve.

He never told anyone what went on inside his house during those two months. His brothers knew though. His brothers witnessed everything.

Alex woke up before dawn on the morning of his visitation with his brother Danny, and the 16-year-old maybe got a couple of hours of sleep as well, even though Reggie was cuddled into him like he used to at the group home. Even though he and Luke were both used to sharing a bed with Reggie, Alex was no longer used to Reggie kicking in his sleep.

"Morning," Ray said as he started to finish scrambling a pan of eggs. "Are Carlos and Reggie up yet?"

"Reggie's using the bathroom in the studio and I think Carlos is in his

room getting ready,” Alex said with a yawn as he reached up to grab a coffee mug.

Ray gently stood in front of the coffee pot, blocking Alex’s access to his morning caffeine.

“What are you doing?” Alex asked.

“So I know you’re going to be more anxious than usual today with seeing Danny and everything, so I’m limiting you to one cup of coffee,” Ray said, confidently.

“You’re kidding right?” Alex asked. “I barely slept last night with Reggie’s stupid kicking, and then my brain wouldn’t shut up. Now you’re telling me that I’m not allowed to drink my usual cup of coffee? This is bullshit!”

“Clearly, you don’t need to be drinking coffee if you’re not sleeping,” Ray joked.

“You know what I mean,” Alex said, tiredly.

“Look, I promise I will let you get a large coffee at Eats & Beats,” Ray said with reassurance.

“Fine,” Alex grumbled.

“Good, now sit down and eat your eggs,” Ray said, placing a plate in front of the 16-year-old. “Julie, Carlos, Reggie! Come eat!”

Julie ran down the steps wearing leggings, a giant sweatshirt, and her hair in a messy bun. She popped two pieces of bread into the toaster and got out a jar of sunflower butter, the peanut butter alternative since Alex was allergic, and started to make sunflower toast.

Julie handed a piece of sunflower toast to Alex and then put two more slices in for Reggie and Carlos.

“Don’t even bother giving Reggie sunflower butter. He’s not going to eat it,” Alex said, biting into his toast. “Try jelly or maybe just butter.”

“We need to broaden his horizons,” Julie joked, grabbing a jar of jelly from the fridge.

“We can maybe start by incorporating some actual vegetables into our meals,” Alex said with a smirk. “I haven’t had a single vegetable since Thursday.”

"I literally made spaghetti with broccoli and a salad on Friday," Ray said tiredly. "And Victoria brought us some arroz con pollo last night and again I made a side salad. It's your fault you didn't choose any of the veggie options available to you."

Julie gave a small laugh as she started scrolling through her phone. She opened up the trending section on Twitter and her jaw immediately dropped. Caleb Covington was trending, and so was the Covington Home for Boys, and the Hollywood Ghost Club.

"Dad, Alex, y-you guys should probably check Twitter right now," Julie said, immediately opening a BuzzFeed article about the situation.

Alex immediately opened his phone and his jaw dropped at the first headline he saw.

Breaking News: Hollywood Ghost Club Shutdown Permanently After Owner Caleb Covington was Arested and Charged with Several Counts of Child Abuse, Child Neglect, and Breaking Child Labor Laws.

"Child labor laws?" Alex said, completely shocked. "I don't remember Caleb breaking any child labor laws."

Alex continued to scroll through Twitter when he then spotted a photo of Reggie scrubbing the floor of the Hollywood Ghost Club with what looked like a bruise on his cheek.

"Oh Reggie," Julie said in a heartbreaking tone.

Ray sighed as he read the article. "God damn it! Who posted this?"

"I think it started from an anonymous account," Alex said.

"Is this legal? I thought Foster Kids weren't allowed to be posted online," Julie asked, angrily.

"Foster parents and big news outlets aren't supposed to," Alex said, shaking his head. "Not without a press release anyway."

"Jesus! it's everywhere!" Julie said, reporting as many photos of Reggie as possible.

"None of the big news lines are posting the photo, but thank god he doesn't have a phone. He's going to freak," Alex said, following Julie in reporting the photos.

“Who’s gonna freak?” Reggie asked as he walked into the kitchen from the studio.

Julie and Alex stopped what they were doing and gave Reggie big smiles.

“I’ll talk to you about it when Laura gets here,” Ray said, setting a plate in front of Reggie. “Do you guys mind taking Carlos over to Flynn’s house or something? I just... I don’t want you guys to accidentally overhear anything personal.”

“Yeah of course,” Julie said, nodding her head. “I’ll go let Carlos know and we’ll leave after me and Alex get ready.”

“Thanks, mija,” Ray said as he kissed the top of his daughter’s forehead.

Julie quickly got up and went upstairs to let Carlos know what was happening while Alex just sat quietly and stared at his phone.

“I shouldn’t have left you,” Alex said, biting his lip. “I should have told Drew that I didn’t want to get placed with a family and then I could have stayed to protect you.”

“What are you talking about?” Reggie asked, knowing he was definitely missing some information.

“Alex this isn’t your fault,” Ray said as he started to rub soothing circles on his back. “I’m almost positive that if you stayed there then you would have been in that picture as well.”

“What picture?” Reggie asked.

“Someone took a picture of you scrubbing the floors at the Hollywood Ghost Club and posted it on Twitter,” Alex said, furiously. “It’s trending, along with Caleb getting arrested.”

“No!” Reggie screamed. “Th-this can’t be happening. I-I thought I was going to be able to move on from this?”

“You will,” Ray argued. “I’m going to do my best to make sure you have a normal childhood from now on.”

“How?” Reggie asked, furiously. “Everyone is going to see that picture and think of me as the pathetic foster kid who was turned into a slave and scrubbed the floors for the Hollywood elite. I’ll never shake that

reputation!”

“Maybe not,” Ray said, getting an idea. “But you can own up to it and use your voice to speak out against other foster kids who are taken advantage of while they’re in the system. Like the ones who are lost within the system or just went missing and deemed as runaways.”

“They lost me...” Reggie said timidly. “Laura said that social services didn’t even know I was there after everything went down. My caseworker left a year ago, and nobody bothered to transfer my case.”

“Seems like you’ve got a reason to be heard,” Ray smiled.

Reggie bit his lip as he sat across the table from his new social worker Laura. She seemed nice enough when he met her for the first time on Thursday, but it was too soon to actually tell.

“Sorry the house is a mess,” Ray said, setting a cup of tea in front of Laura and a cup of hot chocolate in front of Reggie. “We’re still getting everything ready for Christmas and it’s just been kind of hectic around here.”

“No worries,” Laura said, jotting down some notes. “Honestly it’s normal for homes to be a little messy. I’d honestly be more concerned if this place was spotless.”

Ray smiled and took a sip of his coffee.

“So, I was hoping to discuss this after the holidays, but uh well you guys probably saw the articles this morning,” Laura said, nervously.

“Yeah,” Ray said. “Is there anything we can do to stop that picture from circulating online?”

“Not unless it gets used by a media outlet,” Laura said with a sigh. “We can put out a media release urging everyone not to repost that picture, but there’s not much else we can do.”

“Is he going to be safe?” Ray asked, glancing over to Reggie.

“He should be,” she said nodding her head. “As long as you guys don’t post anything about him being here on Social Media then he should be fine until after the trial.”

“When is the trial?” Reggie asked, quietly.

“There is a preliminary hearing scheduled for January 15th, and then the judge will schedule the trial date if the prosecution doesn’t settle, which they most likely won’t,” she said, frowning. “This trial is going to attract a lot of media attention. The Hollywood Ghost Club was a popular hangout and a lot of people are going to want to see how this case plays out.”

“Yeah, but will this case actually change anything about the system?” Reggie asked. He wasn’t even sure if he wanted to speak out like Ray suggested. He was still in the state’s custody and he didn’t want to risk getting taken away from Ray and being separated from Alex and Luke again.

“What do you mean?” Laura asked, slightly confused.

“Like how can we be sure something like this never happens again,” Reggie asked. “I was stuck there for two years and nobody did anything to help me! What’s going to stop foster parents who own a mom-and-pop shop from using their foster kids for free labor?”

Laura stood there for a minute as she thought about Reggie’s statement.

“Look, I personally can’t do anything but notice the signs and try to get kids out before it’s too late,” Laura said, respectfully. “Anything bureaucratic is out of my control. But you have my word that I’m going to keep you safe, and I’m not going to leave you in the cracks again.”

Reggie huffed. This was complete bullshit, and he wasn’t even sure he could trust Laura’s word. The foster system needed immediate reform. They needed to vet out shitty foster parents who only wanted to foster kids for a paycheck or collect them and use them as content online once they were adopted. They needed to protect the kids in the system, otherwise, they are probably better off staying in their birth family’s custody.

“Will I get to testify?” Reggie asked, completely hopeful.

“Possibly,” she said, softly. “There’s a good possibility the prosecution is going to subpoena you since you were a resident there the longest.”

‘Good,’ he thought. He was done staying quiet.

“Reggie, a lawyer should be in contact soon to discuss your options about suing for unclaimed wages,” Laura said, closing her binder.

“Unclaimed wages?” Reggie asked.

“Yeah, you said you practically worked at the Hollywood Ghost Club full time for nine months right?” Laura said with a smile.

“Yeah...” Reggie shrugged. “Way over the 20 hour per week limit. He said I was earning my room and board since it was more expensive keeping me long term. He mostly employed the boys who were about to age out.”

“We can make sure that Caleb pays you all of the wages you’re owed including overtime hours,” she said smiling.

“Are you serious?” Reggie asked, completely shocked.

“Yup, you can use that money on a down payment for an apartment when you turn 18 or to help give you a head start if you decide to go into extended foster care,” Laura said with a smile.

Reggie turned to Ray and gave him a sad smile. Laura was probably right. Ray wasn’t going to adopt him and Reggie would most likely end up aging out of the system. Hell, he wouldn’t even get into college.

“Speaking of long term plans,” Ray started. “I wanted to ask about possibly having Reggie transfer to the Los Feliz School For the Arts in January. My sister-in-law got him an audition, and we really think he could thrive there creatively and academically. If he doesn’t get into any of the arts programs then he can just be enrolled as a regular student.”

“Victoria got me an audition at Los Feliz?” Reggie asked, excitedly.

“Yeah, Alex told her you were a pretty talented musician so she pulled some strings,” Ray said, with a smile.

“I’m good with him transferring schools as long as Reggie’s okay with it,” Laura said, making a note in her binder.

“Thank you,” Reggie said, giving Ray a hug.

“Of course mijo. Though you may want to start practicing, your audition is January 2nd. So, if I were you I’d start preparing now,” Ray said, smiling.

“Yeah of course! I’ll practice 24/7! Thank you so much!” Reggie said,

excitedly.

Laura jotted down some notes in her binder. She knew that Reggie was safe here right now.

Alex nervously played with his hands as he and Ray drove up to Eats & Beats.

“Relax, you’re going to be fine,” Ray said as started to parallel park into a spot right in front of the coffee shop.

“Yeah, but what if Danny hates me, and he’s only meeting up with me to tell me to stop everyone so they can all move on,” Alex said, panicking. “Or worse, what if my parents are giving up their parental rights?”

Ray gently patted Alex’s leg. He couldn’t imagine what was going on inside Alex’s head, but he also couldn’t deny the possibility of Alex’s parents terminating their parental rights. They hadn’t seen or talked to Alex in almost a year, and the nearly 17-year-old deserved to have closure or some sort of permanency in his placement.

“What ever happens, I just want you to remember that you will always have a home with me, okay mijo,” said softly.

“Thanks Ray,” Alex said, with a sheepish smile.

“Of course. Now let's get in there. I’m going to need a large coffee after meeting with two caseworkers today,” Ray joked.

Alex laughed and got out of the car, following Ray inside the coffee shop. Once inside Alex immediately spotted his brother sitting in one of the back tables. Instead of walking up to the counter to order a coffee, Alex just ran towards his brother and engulfed him in a big hug.

“I missed you so much Danny,” Alex said, almost tearing up.

“I missed you to Lex,” Danny said, ruffling Alex’s hair.

“I uh... I wasn’t sure if you were going to have money or anything so I got you a large peppermint mocha,” Danny said, with an awkward smile.

“Thanks,” Alex said, taking a seat across from his brother.

“You look good,” Danny said, noticing Alex was well dressed and well fed. “I uh... I read about that group home that got shut down and I was scared you might’ve ended up there.”

“I did,” Alex confessed. “But I uh... I got out in March and then I was placed with the Molinas. They’re great. Ray treats me just like his biological kids, and he even got me into a music school.”

Danny breathed a sigh of relief.

“So you’re safe?” he asked, confirming his thoughts.

“Yeah I’m safe,” Alex said smiling.

“That’s good... I’m glad,” Danny said, biting his lip. “Did you know the boy in the photo then?”

“Yeah... he was my roommate,” Alex said, purposefully leaving out that he was now his foster brother as well. He trusted his brother, but he didn’t want this info to accidentally leak to the public.

“That must have been scary seeing that photo then... I mean that could have been you,” Danny said, taking a sip of his coffee.

“It most likely would have been both of us. He had been there for a while, and me and our other roommate thought he would age out there. I didn’t want to leave him,” Alex confessed as he tried his best to filter himself. “But Drew, my caseworker told me that this was my one shot at getting placed with a family. Apparently it’s really hard to place gay teens... even in LA.”

“Yeah, teen boys are the hardest to place,” Danny said, nonchalantly.

Alex gave Danny a questioning look, unsure of how or when his 18-year-old brother even learned that information.

“I got sucked into foster care TikTok after you left,” Danny confessed. “It was my way of making sure you’d be safe. It didn’t ease my mind.”

“Yeah, my therapist told me to avoid that side of TikTok. Apparently it causes me anxiety,” Alex joked.

Danny gave a small laugh as he took a sip of his coffee.

“So uh... I got an early acceptance to Notre Dame.”

“Oh my god, that’s great! I’m so proud of you,” Alex said, giving his

brother a hug. "I bet mom and dad freaked when they found out.

"Yeah they took Jack and I out to celebrate afterwards," he said, with a nervous smile.

"What's wrong?" Alex asked. "You should be ecstatic. This has been your dream school since you were like 10."

"No, no, I'm happy," Danny started. "It's just... mom and dad want to move the whole family to Indiana after graduation."

"Oh..." Alex said, not fully expecting that response.

"They're calling your social worker after the holidays to let them know that they're going to terminate their rights," Danny said gently. "I uh... I wanted you to hear this from me."

"So I'm never going to see Jack again?" Alex asked, tearing up. "You're all just abandoning me?"

"I got into UCLA as well, but mom and dad won't pay for me to go there," Danny said, biting his lip. "If I want to make it through college without any student debt then I have to go to Notre Dame. But I promise, I'll write and Facetime you all the time. I'll even sneak Jack into a few phone calls."

Alex continued to cry. As much as Danny was going to promise to stay in contact he knew he wouldn't. He'd be busy with college and their parents would make ridiculous demands about how long he needs to study every day and what organizations he can be a part of. After a couple of years Alex would soon be an afterthought.

"I uh... I got you and Jack something for Christmas," Alex said with a sad smile as he handed Danny the two gift bags he had brought in.

Danny immediately opened his present and smiled as he pulled out a vintage Nikon 35mm film camera.

"Alex, this is too much. I-I can't take this," he said putting the camera back in the gift bag.

"No It's fine," Alex said, pushing the gift back towards Danny. "I found it at a thrift store downtown. There's a good chance it probably won't work, but I thought it would be good decoration for your dorm."

“Thank you,” Danny said, giving Alex the biggest hug ever.

“I got Jack an Indiana Jones lego set,” Alex said, motioning toward the other bag. “It was the last movie we watched together before I got kicked out.”

“He’ll love it,” Danny said, smiling. “I uh... I have something for you as well.”

Danny put a giant filing box on the table and pushed it toward Alex. Alex slowly opened the box and started tearing up again. Inside were all of his baby pictures, school art projects, his old nintendo ds and some games, awards, trophies, and handmade christmas ornaments.

“Mom went through the house a couple weeks ago to get everything ready for Christmas and she uh... she kind of purged you from existence,” Danny said, frowning. “I uh... I scanned all of your photos and put them on a hard drive in case the physical ones got ruined. Oh and I also threw in a bunch of photos of me, you and Jack and a couple with mom and dad in case you wanted those.”

“Thank you,” Alex said, wiping the tears from his eyes. “I was afraid I’d never get to see any of this stuff again.”

“Yeah of course,” Danny said with a small smile. “It just... it didn’t feel right throwing all of that stuff out. You deserved to have it, or at least your new family does. Do you think they’ll adopt you?”

“I uh... I don’t know,” Alex said, shrugging his shoulders. “Ray didn’t want to bring anything up incase mom and dad never went through TPR. But I do know that if I do get adopted then legally, we wouldn’t be brothers anymore. Like my name would legally change, and I’d have a whole new birth certificate and everything.”

“Yeah I know...” Danny said, sadly.

“I think I want to be adopted though... maybe... I’m not really sure,” Alex added. “But uh... would you be okay with that?”

Danny was immediately taken back by Alex’s question. If he was being selfish then he’d say he didn’t want Alex to get adopted. What if their parents came to their senses, but then Alex couldn’t come home because he legally wasn’t a part of their family anymore. He would no longer be entitled to the money their oma was going to leave them when she dies. He wouldn’t be a Mercer anymore.

But Alex also needed a family who was going to love and support him no matter what. He needed a dad who would walk him down the aisle at his wedding. Someone he could call when he's in college and he realizes he made a dumb mistake that needs to be fixed. Someone who could calm him down when he's having a panic attack. He needed a better home and a better family than his parents could offer.

"Y-yeah, I'd be okay with that," Danny said, tearing up. "Just promise me that Jack and I will always be your brothers."

"Of course," Alex said, dumbfounded. "You and Jack will always be my family. Hell, I'll always be a Mercer, but I'm also extending my familiar support just a little bit."

"Well as long as you're safe and happy then I'm okay with you getting adopted," Danny said, smiling. "Now tell me. Have you met any cute boys since you've been gone?"

Alex immediately blushed and started telling him all about his boyfriend Willie and how they met when Willie crashed into Alex one afternoon while he was out searching for Reggie. The two have been dating ever since.

Alex and Danny ended up catching up for an hour and a half, and once 4:30 hit, Danny stood up and gave Alex a hug as he got up to leave. Once Danny was out of the building, Alex picked up his box of old family memories and started to walk back over to Drew and Danny.

"They're terminating their parental rights and moving to Indiana," Alex said through a sob. "My family doesn't want me anymore."

Ray took in a shaky deep breath as he immediately pulled Alex in a hug as he rocked him back and forth. He knew this would come sooner or later, but he was hoping the news would drop after Christmas.

"I'm sorry mijo," Ray said, as he continued to just let his 16-year-old son process his emotions. "I know it sucks, but I promise I will always be here for you."

The two continued rocking back in forth for half an hour and Ray knew at that moment he needed to figure out if it would be possible to adopt Alex. To officially make him a Molina.

Chapter 11: An Army of Gingerbread People

Chapter Summary

It had been two days since Alex's visitation with Danny, and Alex still hasn't left his room. Ray understood that this was a traumatic experience for Alex, it would be on any child who learned that they would never get to go home and see their biological family again, but the longer Alex spent in his bedroom the more concerned Ray became.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It had been two days since Alex's visitation with Danny, and Alex still hasn't left his room. Ray understood that this was a traumatic experience for Alex, it would be on any child who learned that they would never get to go home and see their biological family again, but the longer Alex spent in his bedroom the more concerned Ray became.

Ray slowly walked up the stairs carrying a turkey and cheese sandwich, a small bag of chips, and some carrot sticks, praying that Alex had touched some of the breakfast that he left him earlier this morning. He sighed when he saw the untouched breakfast burrito he made this morning. So, Ray gently set down the new plate of food and picked up the breakfast before knocking on Alex's door.

"Alex mijo, I left you some lunch," Ray said, gently. "Please try to eat some of it."

Ray paused for a few moments to see if he could hear any form of life behind Alex's door. The bed creaked, meaning that the 16-year-old was laying in bed, most likely scrolling through TikTok on his phone.

"I uh... I got all of the ingredients for making gingerbread cookies," Ray said, biting his lip. "And I already set the butter out so it's at room temperature. Whenever you're ready, feel free to come downstairs and we can get started. No rush though."

Ray waited a few moments to see if he could at least get somewhat of a response from Alex, but still nothing.

Ray sighed as he started to walk back downstairs where his other three kids were enjoying their lunch.

“Okay, so I made a quizlet where you can go over theory terms before the theory test,” Julie said as she handed Reggie her iPad. “I’ll give you a practice test after Christmas. Also, are you sure you don’t want me to hear your placement song?”

“Yes I’m sure,” Reggie said with a mouth full of food. “This is the same song I’ve been working on all semester at my old school. I just need to go over it a few more times to make sure it’s perfect. Hey, have you heard from Luke? I haven’t heard from him since we went to the mall. Did he hear about Caleb?”

“Yeah he did,” Julie said with a small smile. “His parents read about it in the New York Times. They’re not letting him out of their sight.”

Reggie got quiet for a moment as he started to think about what happened after Alex the group home. He and Luke were only together for a couple of weeks after Alex had left to go live with the Molinas.

Luke witnessed Caleb taking away the extra mattress in their bedroom. He witnessed Caleb forcing Reggie to stay awake all night to clean the group home as a punishment when one of the other boys' social workers called to let them know they were coming for a check-in.

That wasn’t the worst abuse he suffered in that home, but Luke had gone home before he could witness the rest.

It sucked when Luke left, but Reggie knew it was for the best. He had a home and a family who loved and wanted him. Reggie didn’t want to keep him from that.

“Any word from Alex?” Reggie asked, hopeful as Ray walked into the with an uneaten breakfast burrito.

“Nothing yet,” Ray said with a sad smile. “I’m going to call Dr. Connors and see if I can get him in to see them this afternoon.”

“It’s Christmas Eve Eve dad, I doubt they’re going to be working today,” Julie said.

“Yeah, I know, but I’m hoping they’ll see him if I explain the situation,” Ray said, pulling out his phone.

“Maybe I should try talking to him first,” Reggie said, biting his lip. “I’ve been in this situation before, and I get what he’s going through. Maybe I can help him move on.”

“You can try,” Ray said, gently. “But I’m still going to call Dr. Connors just in case.”

Reggie nodded his head and quickly finished his lunch. He knew he’d probably have to talk to Alex sooner or later, but he was hoping Alex would stop moping around before he got that chance.

As soon as Reggie was finished eating, he gently went upstairs and knocked on Alex’s door.

“Lex?” he asked, praying Alex wouldn’t be snarky. “I’m coming in, okay?”

Reggie waited a moment to see if he’d heard any complaints from Alex about coming into his room. When he didn’t hear any objections, Reggie gently opened the door to Alex’s room and poked his head in.

This was the first time Reggie had ever been inside Alex’s room, and to be honest, he wasn’t entirely sure what he expected when walking in. Alex seemed like a stereotypical gay kid who liked pink and other pastel colors, bubblegum pop music, and Ru Paul’s Drag Race, but Reggie knew there was a whole other side to Alex. He loved hard rock, he killed it on the drums, and he was afraid of confrontation. Reggie was almost positive he would be walking into a room that was a cleaner version of a teen girl’s bedroom, but he was wrong.

First off, Alex’s room was a complete mess. Clothes were all over the floor, there were used Starbucks cups sprawled out all over the room, and a tiny pile of cheese crackers next to his desk. Most likely this was the aftermath of Alex studying for his midterm exams, and the 16-year-old hadn’t had a chance to clean up just yet, but Reggie couldn’t be sure.

Decor-wise, Alex’s bedroom had a mishmash of bright colors. He had a dark wood trundle bed that was pushed against the wall, and a mint comforter and bed sheets with pastel rainbows on them. Against the corner of the room sat an electric drum set, with a set of headphones attached. Two bookshelves on both sides of his desk were filled with LGBT novels, gender theory books and textbooks, a few small knick-knacks, and drumming practice books. Every inch of Alex’s walls was covered with artwork, posters of queer legends and drum Gods, photos of either him and a boy with long black hair, him and Luke, or him with Ray, Julie, and Carlos.

Alex looked happy in every photo, but the physical Alex in this room was clearly devastated.

Reggie frowned as he saw Alex curled up on his bed mindlessly scrolling through TikTok.

“Do you want to talk about what happened?” Reggie asked, biting his lip as he started to prepare himself for the snarky and mean side of Alex to appear. He knew that deep down Alex still loved him, but he channeled teen mean-girl energy when he was in a bad mood, and when he and Luke did something stupid.

He was snarky and mean a lot.

“Nope,” Alex said, quickly.

Reggie took a deep breath and immediately jumped on Alex’s bed. He knew that Alex would force him to talk if he were in this situation, so he went ahead and just prepared for Alex to give him an annoyed look.

“Can you not?” Alex asked, rolling his eyes. “I’m really not in the mood for this right now. Okay? Like I know I’m being stupid and way too over dramatic, but I just lost my entire family. They don’t want me anymore. They’re packing up and moving halfway across the country so they most likely can just create a whole new life and pretend that I never fucking existed.”

Tears started to fall down Alex’s face and he took a couple of seconds to compose himself.

“I know I shouldn’t be this upset!” Alex continued, clearly frustrated with his emotions. “Ray’s not going to kick me out. He made that very clear on Monday after I literally cried on his shoulder for two hours. He took me in and he even treated me better than my own parents did before I was kicked out.”

Reggie just nodded his head. He somehow opened up a floodgate of Alex’s emotions and he was going to just let him process them the way that he processes things, by panicking and ranting.

“Things weren’t all hunky-dory in the Mercer household before they kicked out their 2nd born son,” Alex huffed as he rolled over on his back. “Hell, things sucked before they even found out I was gay. They had all these rules for me and my brothers, practically pushing us to be perfect. If we got a B on anything then we’d be grounded for two weeks. They picked out our clothes, decorated our rooms, and chose our hobbies and our friends. I felt like I couldn’t breathe.”

Alex gently ran his hands over his mint green bedspread, frowning at the idea that his mother would disapprove. She'd disapprove of the entire room. A giant picture of Conan Gray hung next to a picture of him and Willie kissing at one of his concerts. If he hadn't left home, then he never would have met Willie, Luke, or Reggie.

"Ray took me shopping the first week I was here," Alex said with a small smile. "I knew that I wanted this bright and colorful bedroom, but I saw all of the crosses in the house and was terrified he was going to be just like my parents. So, when Ray took me shopping I picked out a gray bedspread with black sheets because I was afraid he was going to judge me for picking something a little more... girly. Ray bought these for me a couple of months later when he realized I liked the color. He didn't freak out when I wore a pink shirt, downstairs the next morning. He just smiled and handed me his terrible eggs."

"I get it," Reggie said, smiling at Alex. "I was like 10 I think when my parents fully lost their rights to me. My parents barely parented me or paid any attention to me, so I shouldn't have been that upset right? I was devastated. I felt like there was something wrong with me, and that nobody wanted me."

"You are wanted," Alex said, gently grabbing Reggie's hand and rubbing smooth circles on it.

"Yeah... by like you and Luke," Reggie shrugged. "But Ray will send me away in a few months claiming that I'm too traumatized or something."

"He's not going to do that," Alex said, rolling his eyes. "He and Victoria are trying to get you into Los Feliz. That school is a commitment. He's not going to advocate for you to get into a fancy art school and pay for one semester's tuition and then send you to a whole new family. What would be the point in that?"

"I don't know," Reggie groaned. "It's just easier than driving to North Hollywood every day I guess."

"If that were the case then he would just enroll you as a normal student, not as a student in the music program," Alex argued. "The music program requires small tuition and lots of commitment. He's in this for the long run. Trust me."

Reggie shook his head, trying to remember the point he was trying to make before he and Alex got sidetracked.

“My point is, yeah it did suck, but eventually I realized that I could make my own family one day and I did. You and Luke are my brothers and nothing is going to ever change that. I will always be here for you, even when our sucky birth parents aren’t.”

“Thanks, Reg,” Alex said, hugging him.

“Also, your parents are going to miss out on having a rockstar for a son,” Reggie joked. “It’s their loss.”

“Yeah, well your parents are idiots,” Alex said, with a smile. “They missed out on getting to know one of the kindest people in the world.”

“Yeah,” Reggie said with a smile. “And if it all turns to shit, then we’ll always have each other!”

Reggie immediately attacked Alex, and the two fell into a fit of laughter. Reggie looked around the room and spotted a small strip of photo booth photos of him, Luke, and Alex. That was taken the day before Alex left for the Molinas.

“Caleb ripped mine up,” Reggie said, sadly as he ran his hands over the photo.

“We can take new ones,” Alex said, frowning. “But don’t worry Ray is going to want to document everything. He already warned me and let me know that there will be a ton of photos taken on Christmas Eve and Christmas morning.”

“Really?” Reggie asked.

“Yeah, he wants to make sure we can always be able to look back on our childhood or something,” Alex said with a shrug.

Their conversation dies down and Reggie spots the box in the corner. “Have you looked inside the box yet?”

“Yeah...” Alex said, groaning. “It’s mainly just old Christmas ornaments I made in elementary school, shitty artwork, a couple of soccer participation trophies from when I was little, and a flash drive of photos and videos. I think my baby teeth are in there, actually.”

“Must be nice,” Reggie said, hugging his knees to his chest. “I’m pretty sure my baby teeth were thrown away or something. Hell, I didn’t even get a visit from the tooth fairy.”

“You’re joking right?” Alex said, completely shocked. “Please tell me you’re joking!”

“I think my school sent my parents my baby teeth when I was there, but nobody ever put money under my pillow,” Reggie shrugged. “Other kids did, but I think their parents left money set aside specifically for the tooth fairy.”

“Jesus, what else did you not do as a child,” Alex huffed.

“I’ve never sat on Santa’s lap and-”

“You’ve never sat on Santa’s lap?” Alex asked, even more shocked. “Not a single foster parent took you to go see Santa?”

“No... It’s not really a big deal though,” Reggie said with a shrug. “I found out he wasn’t real when I was like 6.”

“This is unacceptable,” Alex said, grabbing Reggie’s hand and pulling him downstairs.

Reggie’s face turned red as Alex immediately guided him out of his room. He somehow managed to fix Alex in a matter of like 5 or 10 minutes, but now all of the attention was back on him and his shitty childhood. Next time, he was just going to keep his mouth shut.”

“Ray, we have a problem!” Alex said, stomping down the stairs.

Ray took a deep breath, terrified that Alex was going to say he wants to go live somewhere else. He’d respect it of course, but he’d be heartbroken to know he couldn’t give Alex the proper care he needed.

“Hey, how are you doing?” Ray asked, gently.

“Better,” Alex nodded. “Reggie is strangely good at talking me down. But, that’s not why I came down here. Reggie has never seen or taken a picture with Santa Clause!”

“Wait what?” Ray said, looking over at Reggie. “Not even when you were a baby?”

“I don’t think so,” Reggie shrugged. “I mean they told me the truth about him when I was like 6. Santa photos also cost like a ton of money, don’t they?”

“Not really,” Ray said with a shrug. “Plus my studio takes Santa pictures at the mall every year. So we never have to pay.”

“Dad, we have to take him to the mall to get a picture with Santa,” Julie demanded.

“Won’t it be weird?” Reggie asked, biting his lip. “Plus everyone there is most likely going to recognize me from that stupid photo.”

“Not everyone,” Ray said, gently. “And I’d like to have at least one Santa photo for all of you. Which means Alex needs a photo as well.”

“Actually, I have one I can give you,” Alex blushed. “It’s somewhere on that hard drive Danny gave me. We can go through it later tonight if you want.”

“I’d love to do that with you,” Ray said, giving Alex a big hug. “How about we go through them while the cookies are baking okay?”

“That sounds good,” Alex smiled.

“Your photo can go right next to Julie’s,” Julie joked. “And then Reggie’s will go in between Julie and Carlos.”

Can we at least get one photo of all of us together?” Reggie asked, nervously. “Just so I’m not the only one getting my photo taken with him.”

“Of course,” Ray said, kissing the top of Reggie’s head. “Okay, I want everyone to go put on something Christmasy and please look somewhat nice. I want to leave in... Alex, are you showered?”

“Yes,” he said, nodding his head. “I may have been depressed but I was not going to lay in my own filth for two days.”

“Yet you have empty Starbucks cups all over your room,” Reggie smirked.

“I’ll clean them when we get back,” Alex said, rolling his eyes. “I needed to be caffeinated during midterms.”

“We’re leaving in 20 minutes,” Ray said, rolling his eyes. “Be ready please! The mall is going to be packed and I don’t want to be there all day.”

Alex immediately sprinted up the stairs to go get dressed, but stopped when he remembered that the gingerbread dough needed to be chilled.

“Hey can we maybe make the dough first and then go see Santa?”

Alex asked. "It should only take like 20 minutes. It just needs to be chilled for an hour."

"Yeah that's probably a good idea," Ray said, nodding his head. "Scratch that everyone! We're leaving in 45 minutes! We're making gingerbread dough in 15 minutes!"

Ray nodded his head knowing that it was going to take a little bit of time to make the dough. He was just hoping this was not going to destroy his kitchen.

Reggie bit his lip as he, Alex and Ray all stood inline behind literal children so they could get their photo taken with Santa. Ray sent Julie and Carlos off to the Apple Store to pick up some tech that he ordered on Saturday while Reggie, Carlos and Luke were eating a stuffed pretzel. Two items in that order were Christmas gifts for Reggie. The rest, Ray planned to give Reggie that night. Julie, Carlos and Alex knew exactly what was happening, and they were all excited totally on board.

The line moved forward a bit and butterflies fluttered in Reggie's stomach as he looked at all of the other kids lined up with their paper lists waiting to tell Santa what they wanted for Christmas.

"Am I supposed to tell him what I want for Christmas?" Reggie nervously whispered to Ray and Alex.

"Yes," Alex said, immediately. "It's all part of the Santa Clause experience. "You need to sit on his lap, and tell him what you want and then you'll get a picture with him."

"But you don't HAVE to sit on his lap if you're not comfortable with it," Ray added. He wasn't sure if Reggie had ever experienced sexual assault within the system, Laura never mentioned it, but he didn't want to rule anything out while living under Caleb's care. "I'm not going to force you to sit on a grown man's lap if you don't want to."

"Thanks," Reggie said, nervously.

"But you at least need to tell him what you want," Alex insisted.

"I don't even know what I want for Christmas though," Reggie said. "I didn't think I'd get to celebrate while I was at the group home."

Ray noticed a couple people turn their heads and glance at Reggie with wide eyes. He quickly squeezed Reggie's shoulder before pulling a pair of sunglasses and a mask out of his bag.

"Why don't you put these on while we're waiting in line," Ray said, gently. "Just so nobody sneaks a picture of you."

"Why does it Matter though, won't everybody see my face when I get up there?" Reggie asked. "Plus I'll be the only person here covering their entire face. I'll look weird."

"We have a curtain for privacy when celebrity children schedule to get their photo taken," Ray added. "It's why we've been hired to do this for like 16 years."

"Did you photograph Blue Ivy?" Alex asked, excitedly. "Or what about Meghan Trainor's kid? He's so cute!"

Ray rolled his eyes as he ignored Alex's question. He signed an NDA with these clients and he knew it would be violated if he mentioned anything, even to his kids.

"I'm not saying anything," Ray said, zipping his lips as he kept his eyes on a group of moms in front of them who kept staring at Reggie.

Alex noticed as well and tugged Reggie closer to him.

"So what are you going to ask Santa for?" Alex said changing the subject. "A teddy bear, a new bike, or maybe a doll?"

"Do I look like a child from the 60s or 70s?" Reggie snarked.

"A little bit," Alex teased. "But seriously, tell me what you're going to ask for."

"I don't know..." Reggie blushed. He really wanted a phone or a laptop since he wasn't sure if Los Feliz gave their students chromebooks, but he didn't want to sound greedy asking for something that expensive. "Maybe...a suitcase? So I don't have to carry all my stuff in a trash bag when I leave."

"You're never going to have to do that again," Ray said, giving Reggie a hug. "I promise."

Realistically, Ray wanted to promise Reggie that he wouldn't have to worry about being moved again, but he didn't want to promise

anything until he knew for sure he could adopt Reggie. Sadly, he had to wait 6 months before he was even allowed to begin the adoption process, and he also had to get Reggie's permission as well.

The group of ladies must have overheard what Reggie said and turned around again. Reggie groaned internally, not really wanting to deal with people recognizing him for his trauma. He deserved to have some sort of normalcy when going out in public.

"I'm sorry," one of the mom's said as the line moved forward some more. "But, uh... aren't you boys a little old to be waiting in line to see Santa?"

Reggie blanked, clearly that wasn't what he was expecting to hear from this mom. He turned to Ray and Alex not knowing how to respond to her.

Alex on the other hand was not having any of her shenanigans. The tall, blonde, and now pissed off 16-year-old, simply crossed his arms and gave the soccer mom a death glare.

"Why do you care?" Alex asked, bluntly. "What we do is none of your business."

"It's the day before Christmas Eve," she said, rolling her eyes. "This time should be reserved for families with small children. You two sitting on Santa's lap will just take away from a child who wants to see Santa before Christmas."

Reggie bit his lip, she was right. He was 15, he didn't need to see Santa. He was taking this opportunity away from a kid who really wanted to see Santa before they woke up on Christmas morning. Reggie knew the truth, he could survive.

"It's really none of your business ma'am," Ray said, sternly as he rubbed soothing circles on Reggie's back to calm him down.

"I'm just saying, It's not fair to all of the kids waiting in line to see Santa," she huffed.

"Every kid in this line will see Santa," Ray said, standing his ground. "Nobody is going to get turned away."

Reggie kept his eyes closed as Ray and this Karen were arguing back and forth about whether or not he should be allowed to see Santa. The entire time, Ray was trying not to reveal the fact that Reggie had a

shitty childhood and had never sat on Santa's lap or taken a picture with the jolly man. He couldn't take it anymore. He needed this lady to just shut up.

Ray whispered something in Alex's ear, and Alex nodded his head and quickly got out of line and headed to the front towards security. He had been here a couple times helping Ray out as one of Santa's helpers/photographers assistant in exchange for Ray buying him a new pair of noise cancelling headphones. Willie accidentally broke his old pair after an intense makeout session.

He learned to never leave stuff on his bed while making out with his boyfriend ever again.

Ray happily bought Alex a new pair, and even let him know that he could just get him new ones for Christmas, but Alex insisted on paying him back since he and Willie were so careless in the first place.

Ray couldn't believe how responsible Alex was.

"Okay, but why are you bringing two teenage boys, who clearly aren't your kids to see Santa anyway?" she said, aggressively. "Are you like some pedophile or something?"

"He's not a pedophile!" Reggie said, rubbing his temples. "He's my foster dad, and he's taking me to see Santa because I had a shitty childhood and I've never seen or taken a picture with Santa before."

Reggie watched as the Karen rolled her eyes, clearly not believing his statement.

"Oh please," she replied, catching the attention of more people. "I can see the bruises on your face. If he's hitting you, you can let me know and I can get you help."

"He didn't hit me," Reggie insisted. "I was in a bad group home and I just got placed with him."

The Karen still didn't seem to believe him and tried to think of a way to argue back when Alex started to walk back with a college student wearing an Elf costume.

"Ma'am I'm going to have to ask you leave," he said, hoping to make this process go quickly.

"You're asking me to leave?" she asked, flabbergasted. "I'm not the

pedophile bringing two teenage boys that aren't his to see Santa Clause. I'd like to speak with you're manager!"

The college student politely pointed at Ray, and Ray just gave her a smile.

"Yeah, this is my company taking photos," he said gently. "And I was trying my best not to cause a scene since it's so close to the holidays. However, since you accused me of being a pedophile and refused to mind your own business even after my son here tried to explain our situation, then I'm going to have to politely ask you to leave and not to come back."

Reggie just looked at Ray for a moment to double check if he heard him correctly. Did Ray really just call him his son? No, he had only been there for a few days, he probably just didn't hear the foster part of his sentence.

The Karen huffed and took her daughter and exited the line. Reggie felt bad that the little girl in line wouldn't get to see Santa Clause before Christmas, until Ray gently told him that there were plenty of other locations where she could get her photo taken with Santa.

The trio continued to wait in line for another 20 minutes before Julie and Carlos came back and handed Ray his car keys.

"So, how's the wait? Are there a lot of crying toddlers?" Julie asked, jokingly.

"No, but there was a crying Karen," Alex said with a smile.

Julie looked over to her dad and he just rolled his eyes. He wasn't offended by what she said. He wasn't a pedophile and Reggie and Alex were his kids despite the fact that they aren't biologically related.

After another 20 minutes, it was finally Reggie's turn to see Santa. Reggie gingerly walked up the stairs towards the jolly man and stood beside him. He was way to big to sit in a strangers lap, and he didn't want the man to touch him inappropriately.

"Ho, ho, ho," Santa jollied as Reggie came a little closer.

Reggie could tell that the man was trying to suppress a sad smile, either from his still bruised face or he recognized him from that stupid photo.

“I’m glad you’re safe now,” he said gently as he glanced at Reggie’s foster family watching the interaction.

Ray had known this Santa for about 10 years now. He was a retired television writer who’s granddaughter went to school with Julie. The two kids were pretty good friends at the time, but fell out of touch when Julie got accepted into the music program at Los Feliz. Ray trusted this man not to be a creep, and in return this man knew that Ray was a good father and always did what was best for his kids.

“Thanks,” Reggie said, awkwardly. “Look I’ve uh... I’ve visited Santa before and my foster family really wants me to experience this. But I know Santa’s not real so I’m not going to ask for anything.”

“Of course,” he said, nodding his head. “How about a wish then?”

“Okay...” Reggie said, biting his lip. “I wish that every foster child in LA could have a safe Christmas and at least wake up with something under the tree for them.”

“That’s a really good wish,” he said as he gently patted Reggie on the back. “I visited a few Children’s shelters around Los Angeles this month, and I made sure I brought presents for kids to open on Christmas morning. I’m really sorry about what happened to you, but there are people who are trying to help and make sure that you kids are all safe.”

“Thanks,” Reggie smiled. “C-can we get a picture and then Ray wants one with everyone.”

“Of course,” Santa said, gently smiling.

Reggie bent down next to Santa and smiled next to him. He didn’t love that his only picture with Santa Clause would be of him with a busted face, but he knew that it was also a good memory because his busted face meant that he escaped and survived The Covington Home for Boys.

Ray smiled as he looked over all of the proofs from the Santa visit as Alex and Reggie worked on kneading out the gingerbread. All of the photos were uploaded to a central cloud where parents could purchase prints 1 hour after their photos were taken. The photos would then be available to pick up the next day at their physical location in Los Feliz.

It was a grueling process, but Ray hired a ton of extra help and made sure that none of his employees were over worked.

Thankfully for Ray though, he had a printer and extra frames at home, so he could easily print the Santa photos and have them hung up that night.

“Hey Alex, when that first batch of cookies are in the Oven could you please go get me that Hard drive so I can find your Santa photo?” Ray asked, excited to get these photos on the wall as soon as possible.

“Yeah of course,” Alex said, pressing down hard on one of the cookie cutters.

He placed the cut out gingerbread person on the baking tray and placed it in the oven. Letting Reggie continue working on his tray. The four kids were each taking turns cutting out a tray, and then if they somehow managed to make five whole trays of gingerbread then they would do the last one together.

Alex quickly ran upstairs to grab the hard drive when he noticed Julie’s door was wide open as she was wrapping something for Reggie.

“I’m just about done wrapping Reggie’s stuff and then I’ll be right down,” Julie said, excitedly. “Do you think he’s going to be excited?”

“Yeah,” Alex said, smiling. “I think it’ll help him realize that you guys are serious about him being a part of this family. It’s a really big commitment and not a lot of foster parents trust foster kids enough to give them something that expensive.”

“I hope so,” Julie said, smiling. “Hopefully if he wants to, then he’s here to stay.”

“I’ve got to get this drive downstairs and then it’s almost your turn to start cutting the gingerbread army,” Alex smiled.

“I can’t wait,” Julie said, sarcastically. “I honestly just want to decorate them and make them all cute.”

“Fine, then you can make the icing,” Alex said, heading back downstairs.

Alex came back into the kitchen and smiled as Ray plugged the harddrive into his computer.

His mouth hung open as he saw that everything was nicely labeled and there were even two separate folders, one for videos and one for photos.

“You have videos as well,” Ray smiled. “Oh my god this is so organized. This must have taken him hours.”

“They were already meticulously labeled,” Alex said, rolling his eyes. “All he had to do was copy and paste everything onto a hard drive.”

“Well tell him I’m very thankful he gave this to us, and if he ever wants a free photoshoot, then I will happily give him one,” Ray said, as he was scrolling through the videos.

“I’ll text him,” Alex blushed. “We exchanged numbers before he left.”

Ray continued scrolling and his eyes went wide when he came across a video titled Saint Francis’s Christmas Pageant - kindergarten. Ray remembered reading that Reggie had been enrolled in a Catholic School up until he left for boarding school, and to be honest he forgot that Alex attend that school until last Winter. There’s no way the two went to the same elementary school, right?

Ray fast forwarded a bit until they got to a pre school four class and Ray closely watched as he watched the four-year-olds butcher Silent Night. Then his heart almost stopped when he saw Reggie step down from the risers and start singing a solo.

“No way!” Ray said with his hand over his face. “Reggie, Alex you guys have to see this.”

Reggie placed the last gingerbread person on the tray and walked over to Ray.

“Did you find a video of Alex falling down or something,” Reggie teased.

“Shut up,” Alex said, gently shoving Reggie’s shoulder.

“Better,” Ray smiled. “Reggie I just found a video of you singing when you were four.”

“What?” Reggie asked, completely shocked.

He raced over to Ray and sure enough that was him getting up in front of his entire school to start singing Away In A Manger. He then bit his

lip. He remembered his mom had dropped him off at the pageant before leaving and going back to work. He also remembered his mom was late to pick him up so an older boy and his family stayed until his mom came to pick him up.

He couldn't remember who that older boy was though, but he remembered running through the grass for about an hour before his mom came and finally picked him up.

"I didn't realize we went to the same school," Reggie sniffled.

"Yeah, my parents filmed every single talent show and school pageant available, so there's a good chance we must have caught a few of your performances," Alex said, hugging Reggie.

"I never thought I'd see anything from my childhood again," Reggie said tearing up. "This is amazing."

Julie and Carlos quickly came down the stairs when they started to smell fresh ginger bread, but the duo stopped when they noticed Reggie crying.

"They're happy tears," Ray informed them as he motioned for them to come join them.

"Well, I was going to wait until after dinner," Ray started. "But I think this might be a better time."

Ray motioned for Julie to go grab the presents and Julie raced up stairs and grabbed the two presents Reggie would be getting tonight. Her dad had the rest of the things bought from their Apple Store trip in his office, and she knew that this was going to help Reggie feel like a normal kid and succeed at Los Feliz.

"Here you go," Julie said, as she skipped into the room.

"What is this?" Reggie asked, looking at the two wrapped boxes Julie had put in front of him. "It's not Christmas yet?"

"I know," Ray said, smiling. "These aren't Christmas gifts."

Reggie started opening the smaller box and immediately burst into tears when he opened a brand new iPhone. He couldn't believe it. He had never had a foster family purchase him something that nice a week into their care.

“A-are you sure?” Reggie asked, sobbing.

“Yeah, mijo. I’m sure.” Ray said, giving Reggie a hug. “You’re 15, and you’re going to need a phone so you can go out without me or Julie or Alex. We have unlimited data, and we will add you to our family Apple Plan.”

Reggie wiped his eyes, still not believing that there was another box in front of him. Ray gently pushed Reggie to open the other present and Reggie continued sobbing when he opened a Macbook Air.

Ray knew that he was spending a lot of money on Reggie up front, but he deserved it. Reggie needed to be able to feel like a normal kid, and giving him access to his own technology was a part of that process.

“Thank you so much,” Reggie sobbed. “I-I promise I’ll be really good, and I won’t do anything to make you disappointed in me.”

“It’s okay mijo,” Ray said, kissing the top of his head. “I just want you to try your best and be yourself. That’s all.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to @interestinglittlerelationship & @Willowfae82 for giving me inspo for Alex's room!

I hope to have a new update soon, but I'm not going to rush or push myself since I have a busy next couple of weeks!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!